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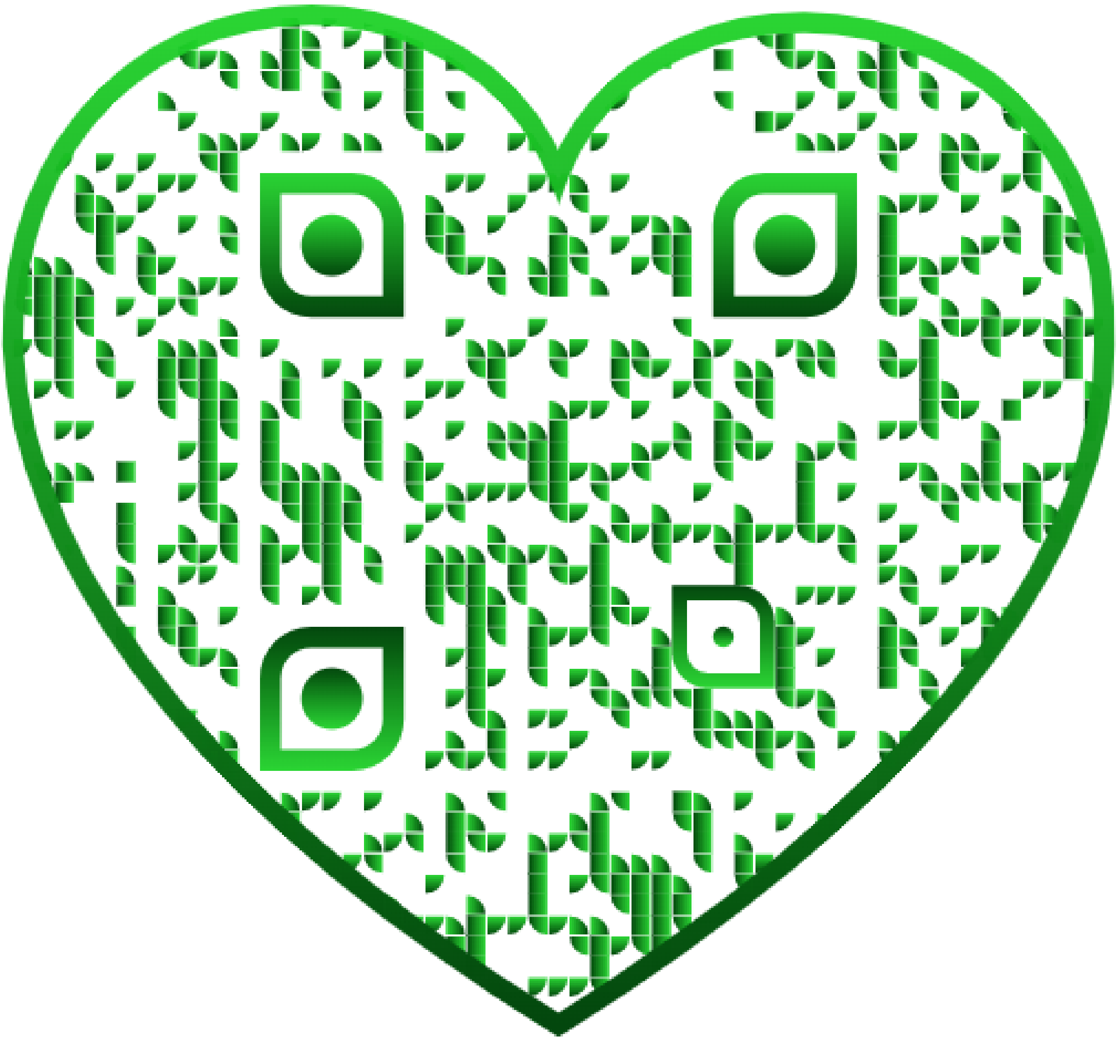

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RANGE ROVER

CHARLOTTE

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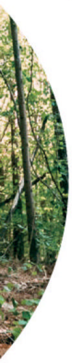

Fall hits different in Charlotte. Cooler temperatures, vibrant flavors and a season packed with energy. From festivals to firepits, it's all happening in the Queen City.

FAHRENHEIT

CHARLOTTE FC

AURA ROOFTOP

ONLY IN CHARLOTTE

Gorgeous trails, vibrant cultural experiences and family-friendly fun are just a few of the only-in-Charlotte autumn moments you'll want to turn into seasonal traditions.

- Peep the foliage in **Romare Bearden Park** or along the greenway at **Freedom Park**.
- Sip cider and explore the trails at the **Whitewater Center**.
- Get creative at the Charlotte International Arts Festival.
- Celebrate the culture of Charlotte at Hola Charlotte Festival, Festival of India, Jollof Festival or Yiasou Greek Festival.
- Plan for fun at **Camp North End** with markets, live music and outdoor movies.

GET IN THE GAME

From Uptown tailgates to watch parties in rooftop lounges, sports bars and breweries, fans won't want to miss these game day experiences in the Queen City.

- Catch a Carolina Panthers or college bowl game at **Bank of America Stadium**.
- Become a member of Buzz City at a Charlote Hornets game at **Spectrum Center**.
- Feel the need for speed at the Bank of America ROVAL 400 at **Charlotte Motor Speedway**.
- Watch the Charlotte Checkers take the ice at **Bojangles Coliseum**.
- Get ready to yell "GOAL!" at a Charlotte FC or Carolina Ascent FC match.

DINE AL FRESCO

Pack your appetite for menus filled with locally sourced ingredients from the nearby Piedmont mountains and Atlantic Coast and flavors that are distinctly Charlotte.

- Grab a seat under the twinkle-light adorned holly tree at **The Goodyear House**.
- Soak up the skyline at **Fahrenheit** where the view's only competition is the food.
- Cheers with a craft cocktail on the rooftop patio of **Aura Rooftop**.
- Stroll the Rail Trail for endless dining and drinking options like **Chapter 6**, **Trolley Barn** and **Canopy Cocktails & Garden**.
- Taste traditional German bites in the **Olde Mecklenburg Brewery Beer Garden**.

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Across the Balkans, photographer Kari Medig chronicles a ski scene that's charmingly offbeat, with spacious slopes and laid-back villages that recall a bygone era.

RENTA & SKI SERVIS
Marconi

KARI MEDIG

THE SKY CAN BE A REAL SHOW OFF.
Canada, naturally.
CANADA

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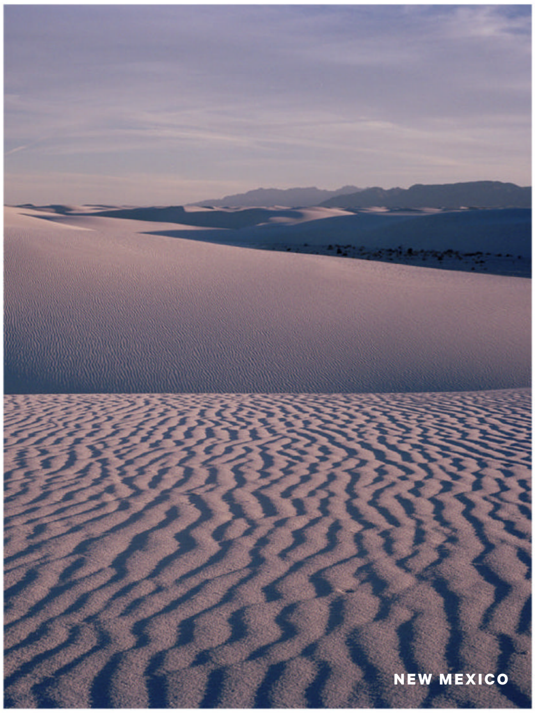
AMERICA 250



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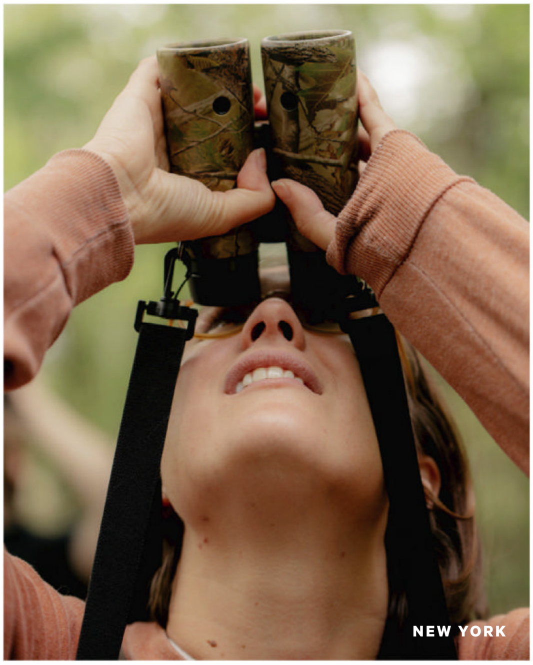
Once-in-a-lifetime experiences across the United States come in all shapes and sizes, from shipwreck diving in Michigan to tracking wolves in Wyoming.



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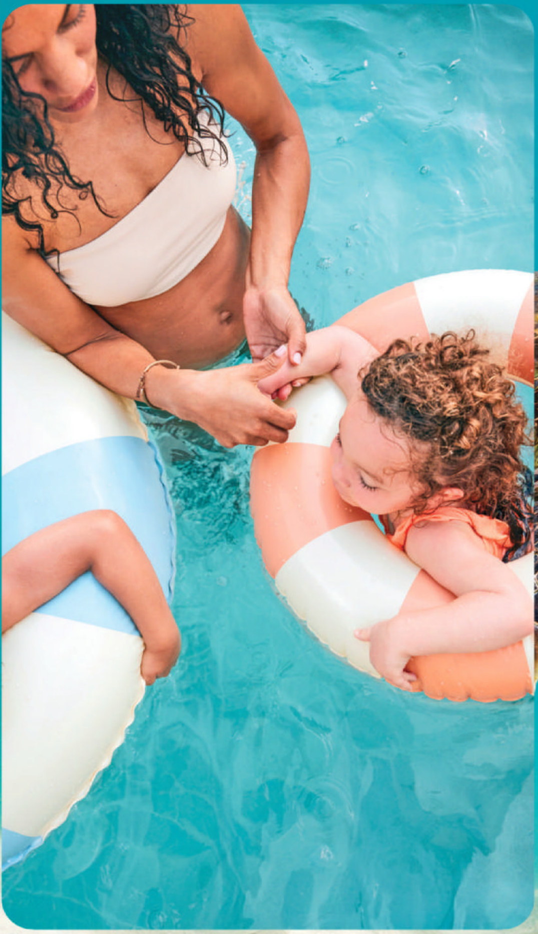

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Explore
More

Features

Given the heights and drops awaiting us in Machu Picchu, I had to wonder if anything up there would be worthy of a blind man's risk.

SENSES OF PLACE

p.80

IVANA CAJINA

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CHARLESTON
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CELEBRATES
America's 250th

WHERE THE REVOLUTION ECHOES STILL

In *Charleston, South Carolina,* the story of America's fight for independence comes alive, not just in textbooks or museums, but underfoot, in the very streets, gardens, and fortifications that bore witness to revolution.

As one of the most significant cities of the Revolutionary War, Charleston stood at the crossroads of strategy and struggle. British occupation. Colonial resistance. Local heroism. The siege of 1780. These aren't distant memories, but chapters you can still explore.

Start your journey at **The Charleston Museum**, the nation's first, to set the stage for centuries of Lowcountry history. Stroll **The Battery**, where cannons once defended Charleston Harbor. Step inside **The Powder Magazine**, South Carolina's oldest public building, where colonial militias stored arms. Tour the **Heyward-Washington House**, home to a signer of the Declaration of Independence and once host to President George Washington himself.

Walk through the **Old Exchange and Provost Dungeon**, where patriots were imprisoned beneath the grand Palladian-style halls and where the Constitution was ratified. Visit the **Miles Brewton House**, seized by British forces and turned into headquarters for General Clinton during the occupation.

Stand at **Fort Moultrie**, where patriots famously used palmetto logs to repel the British fleet. Explore **Marion Square**, once the site of colonial fortifications. Wander the Historic District, where Georgian architecture and cobbled alleys still speak of rebellion, resilience, and revolutionary ideals. Head just beyond the peninsula to the **Charles Pinckney National Historic Site**, honoring a principal framer of the U.S. Constitution and a voice of South Carolina's revolutionary leadership.

Venture along the Ashley River to **Drayton Hall** and **Middleton Place**, two of America's oldest plantations. Explore Drayton Hall's preserved 18th-century estate, then stroll Middleton Place, once home to a Revolutionary officer and generations who shaped the land and its legacy.

Plan your visit to the Charleston area, where America's founding story unfolds at every turn.

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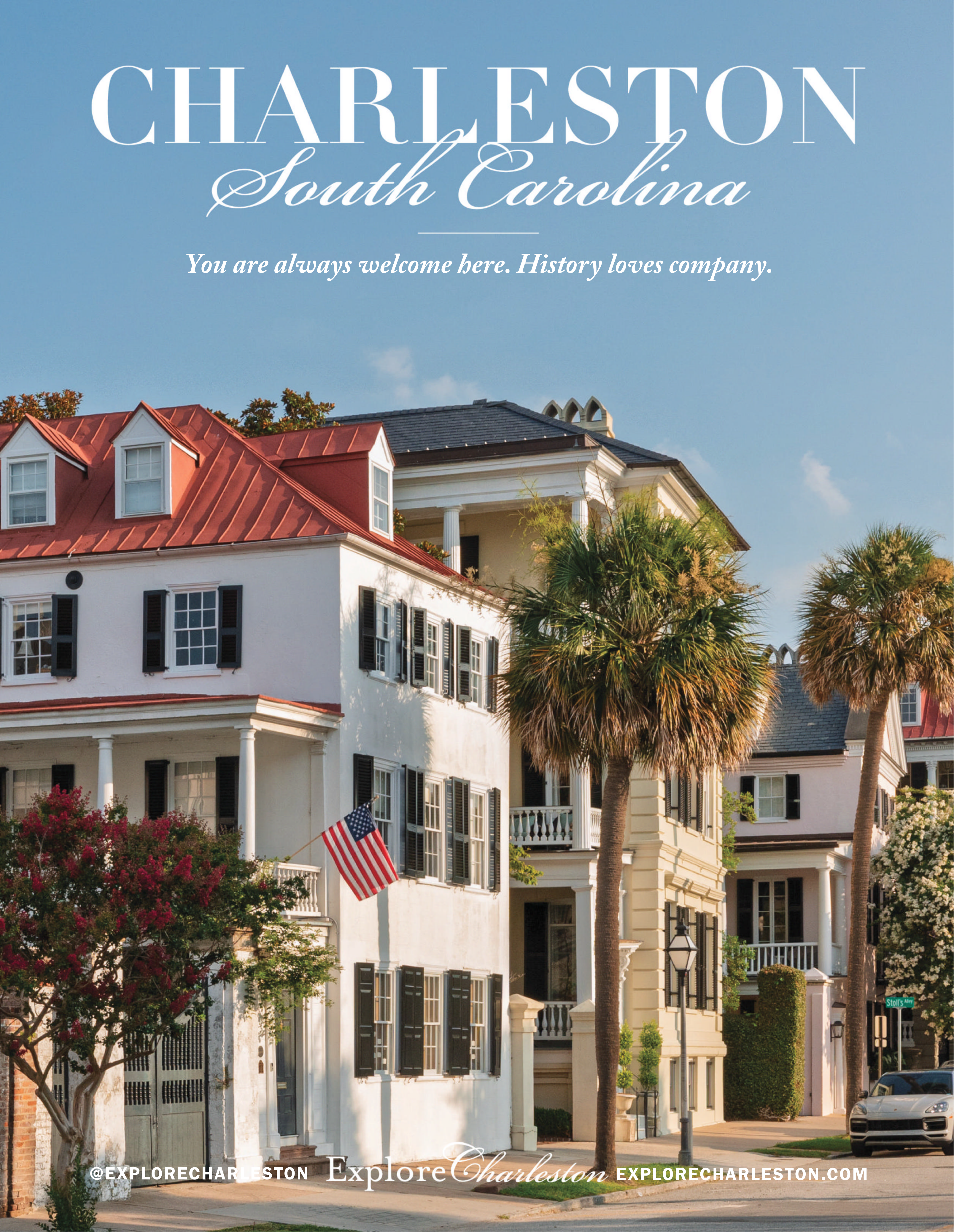
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South Carolina

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FOUNDERS Greg Sullivan & Joe Diaz

What epic trip in the U.S. do you hope to take next?

“I’m dying to see Michael Heizer’s *City*, a monumental piece of land art in the middle of the Nevada desert that took 50 years to build. Only six people can visit per day.” —**N.D.**

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“I want to island-hop across Lake Superior, from Michigan’s Grand Island to Isle Royale National Park to the Apostle Islands in Wisconsin, and end with canoeing in Minnesota’s Boundary Waters.” —**D.H.**

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“I’d love to drive along the Mississippi Blues Trail to learn about the history of the Deep South through its music.” —**A.B.**

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“Last year, I went to the Murder Mystery Weekend at the Grand Hotel on Mackinac Island in Michigan. It was over-the-top and gorgeous. I loved it so much, I’m hoping to go back next October.” —**D.D.**

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More than 250,000 people a year visit Chile's Torres del Paine National Park. Many hike the 12.5-mile route to the viewpoint at the base of the Torres peaks, which takes around 7–10 hours to complete.

KATHERINE LAGRAVE

A Great Big World

WHEN I WAS 11, my family of five traveled to northern Thailand for several weeks. We hiked through jungles and up steep mountains by foot, building rafts from bamboo with our two local guides when we needed to move downriver. It was the first trip I can remember where I felt pushed outside my physical and mental comfort zones—but it wasn't *uncomfortable*. It was challenging, thrilling, complicated. Though I didn't know the meaning of the word then, it was epic.

In the decades since that Thailand trip, I've sought out this particular algorithm of exhilaration, and epic trips now feature as some of my favorite travel memories. Recently, I've snorkeled Oman's dizzyingly beautiful Daymaniyat Islands, hiked 62 miles of the Stockholm Archipelago Trail, helped restore paths and taken long treks in Chile's Torres del Paine National Park (pictured), and swum alongside gentle, bus-size whale sharks in Western Australia's Ningaloo Reef.

In this issue, our third devoted to epic trips, Afar's food-obsessed director of podcasts, Aislyn Greene, eats and drinks and shops along France's roughly 385-mile Vallée de la Gastronomie (page 35); contributing writer Ryan Knighton, who is blind, journeys to Peru to scale Machu Picchu and to explore the Amazon on his first group tour (page 80); photographer Kari Medig skis the uncrowded Balkans (page 92); and contributing writer Chris Colin travels to Botswana for a perspective-shifting family safari that includes biking (page 66).

And as we continue celebrating the 250th birthday of the United States—an ambitious 18-month editorial initiative running across Afar's print, digital, audio, email, and social media platforms—we spotlight adventures closer to home, from Wyoming to Maryland (page 41). All epic trips, and all so very much fun.

Where to next?

Yours in good travel,
KATHERINE LAGRAVE
Executive Editor

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THE SIGNATURE SUITE COLLECTION

by **LATRIA GRAHAM**

Illustrations by **VIOLETA ENCARNACIÓN**

Hidden Figures

*In travels across the country, contributing writer **Latria Graham** gains a deeper understanding of places by digging into their lesser-known histories.*

LATE IN THE SPRING of 2023, a short footnote in a book brought me to the Anne Spencer House & Garden Museum in Lynchburg, Virginia. A librarian and part-time teacher at the segregated Paul Laurence Dunbar High School for nearly 20 years, Spencer was also an activist and published poet who touched on topics of race and feminism. She was the first Black woman to be included in the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* in 1973.

When I arrived at the museum in early June, Spencer's granddaughter, Shaun Spencer-Hester, showed me around and shared memories of the woman who knew Marian Anderson, Martin Luther King Jr., W. E. B. Du Bois, Thurgood Marshall, and Langston Hughes, all of whom visited her home. I stood transfixed in front of Spencer's writing desk, situated in a small stone-and-wood cottage in the middle of her botanical

garden, amazed that this tour allowed me to access the creative space of a literary icon. The contents in her office were just as she left them when she died.

Spencer was well known during her lifetime (1882–1975), but in today's pantheon of hallmark Harlem Renaissance literary figures, her name is rarely mentioned. It was another reminder that if I was willing to take a few minutes to follow my curiosity, I could discover stories and places that are often overlooked.

As a Black writer in the United States, I center the existence of marginalized people, because in most spaces I *am* a marginalized person. I want to know more about the women, people of color, and LGBTQ folks who have inhabited the places where I currently exist—and how they changed them for the better.

Exploring a location's lesser-known past requires being observant and being willing to search for clues. Before traveling, it might involve more research about the characters and events mentioned in a story; on road trips it regularly means I whip a U-turn to look at a marker. When I learn about historical figures or places, I ask several questions:

If this was a powerful person, who made their day-to-day routines possible? What were the social norms of this culture or region? What type of person wouldn't be welcome here? Who was discouraged—by law or by custom—from writing things down, documenting their experiences, or speaking their minds?

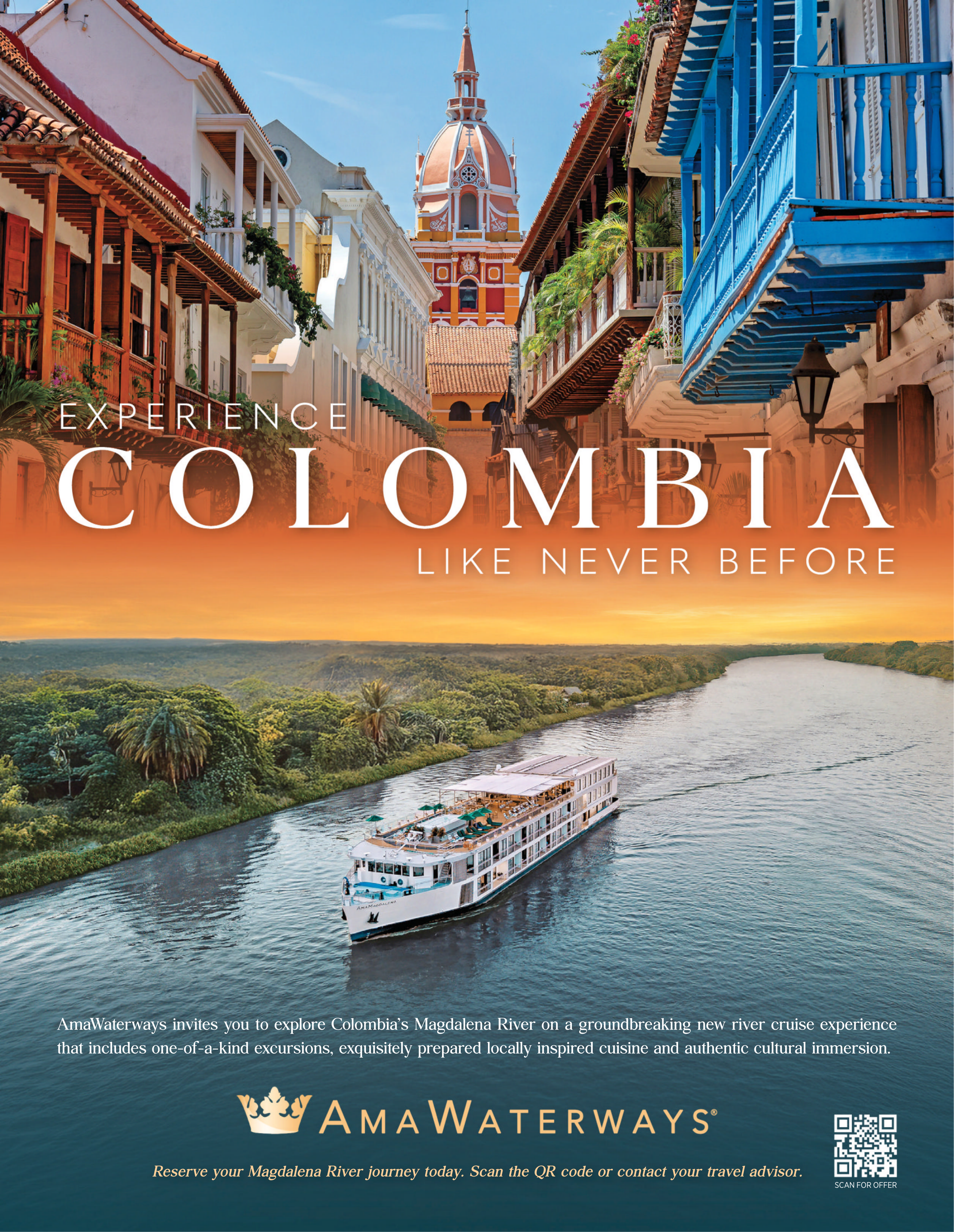
Frequently, I seek out historical societies and libraries, as most—whether they are private or public—usually have at least one rotating exhibition on display. One of my favorite haunts (and my former workplace) is the grand New York Society Library on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Founded in 1754, its holdings are vast: Past shows have celebrated everything from the botanical illustrations of 19th-century artist Margaret Armstrong to the effect that librarians Dorothy Porter and Jean Blackwell Hutson had on Black literature written in the city.

After all, there's more to history than just memorizing battle dates and the names of those in power.

Sometimes, if the archivist, docent, or librarian isn't occupied with other tasks, I take a moment to ask them about the location and its historical context. I often end these conversations with another question: *If you could present an exhibition about a local person that you find deserving of recognition, whom would you choose?*

When I can, I collect the exhibition catalog, because an introductory essay might introduce new-to-me movements and figures in history. If there's a gift shop, I acquire locally printed books or informational pamphlets that are difficult to purchase online. I pop into a neighboring independent bookstore to see if someone from the area has written a guidebook that might provide me with information about characters or events that institutions such as libraries, museums, and historical sites might not have the funds, space, or interest to explore.

Traveling with this approach allows me to interact with and actively learn from the past and the choices people made: After all, there's more to history than just memorizing battle dates and the names of those in power. At its core, exploring the world this way means understanding the context, motivations, and consequences of past events, and recognizing how they shape who we are as people, citizens, and travelers today.



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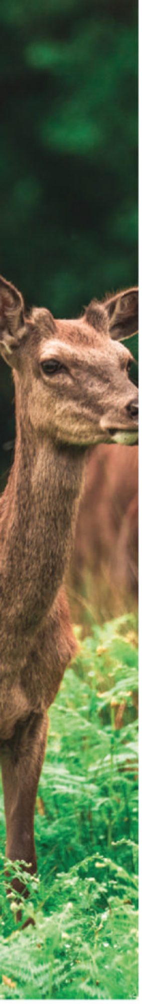
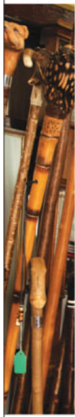


SPIN THE GLOBE

Afar chose a destination at random—by spinning a globe—that launched Genevieve Gorder and Christian Dunbar on a spontaneous, perspective-shifting journey in the first episode of our new original travel show.



UNEXPECTED LONDON

Two designers on a last-minute trip use their Chase Aeroplan® Cards to find a playground of culture.

WITH JUST 24 HOURS' NOTICE, WE SENT INTERIOR DESIGNER GENEVIEVE GORDER TO LONDON with her husband, furniture designer Christian Dunbar, to shake up their idea of a city they thought they knew. "We definitely forget to do new things," Dunbar said. Follow along as they discover the city's hidden side street rich in musical heritage, a Michelin-starred restaurant reimagining seasonal cuisine, and more—all starring in the debut show of the Afar series, *Spin the Globe*, sponsored by the Chase Aeroplan® Card.

Treehouse Hotel London
The couple checked into this leafy, pet-friendly haven with a rooftop bar and restaurant close to the boutique-lined colonnades of Regent and Bond Streets. Inside, playful design elements and mid-century style meet charming greenery-accented spaces in a skyscraper with sweeping views of the London Eye, the Shard, and Canary Wharf.

Richmond Park
Dunbar and Gorder rented bicycles in Richmond Park—a 2,500-acre preserve of grasslands, rolling hills, and ancient forest groves right in London—to cruise the landscape and see wildlife. Originally 17th-century hunting grounds, this royal park is well-populated with deer today. It's "like you're biking through a painting," Gorder said.

Ikoyi
Lunch was in the sculptural dining room of this Michelin-starred restaurant. The travelers enjoyed a meal that combined multicultural influences with hyper-local British ingredients in otherworldly dishes such as smoked rice with

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4

lobster custard. Plus, Gorder and Dunbar's meal earned 3x points on dining here and at other restaurants throughout the trip with the Chase Aeroplan Card.

Denmark Street
Here, the designers dipped into London's music history, where legendary artists have recorded since the 1950s. "Sometimes you don't need a time machine to hear echoes of the past," said Gorder before picking up a locally crafted guitar strap for a friend at Hanks Guitar Shop.

The Design Museum
"I had no idea how magnificent this was going to be," Gorder said of this museum, housed in one of London's most significant examples of modern architecture. The collection aims to transform how people perceive themselves and their future through the lens of technology and contemporary aesthetics.

James Smith & Sons
London's oldest umbrella shop has been handcrafting bumbershoots and walking sticks since 1830. Gorder stopped by the beloved landmark with Dunbar for a classic British souvenir. She used her Chase Aeroplan Card and he earned 1x points on the purchase.

1. *St. Helen's Place*
2. *Kew Gardens*
3. *James Smith & Sons*
4. *A double-decker bus*

The Cheese Barge
Moored on the Regent's Canal, this 96-foot-long double-decker boat celebrates Britain's cheesemaking revival. The pair sampled the best goat cheese Dunbar says he ever had—and burrata made in north London that morning. "This is all I ever really need in a meal," Gorder said.

The upshot of going on this whirlwind adventure? "This trip changed more than how I travel. It changed how I see," said Gorder. And the points earned are already helping fuel more travel—thanks to access to over 1,300 destinations through more than 45 global airline partners with the Chase Aeroplan Card.

Watch the episode for a trip through lesser-known London: Afar.com/SpinTheGlobeLondon

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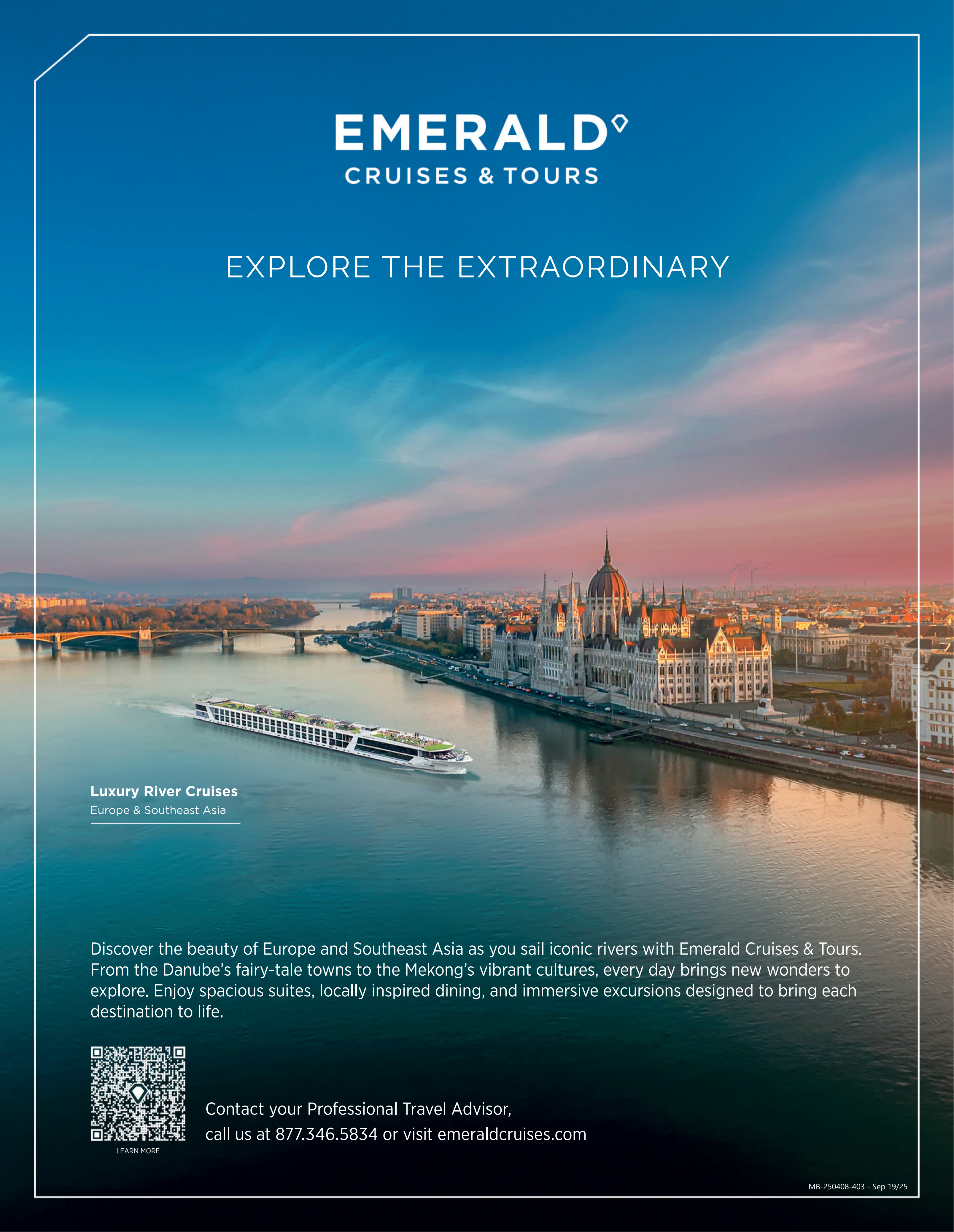

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Smooth Sailing

by Jeri Clausing and Fran Golden

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ADRIAN GAUT

JAPAN

Abercrombie & Kent

Its combination of traditional and modern architecture, and ancient history and pop culture, has made Japan one of the most appealing cruise destinations in Asia—not least because so much of it is accessible by water. In spring 2026, luxury tour operator Abercrombie & Kent is chartering Ponant's *Le Jacques Cartier* to explore five islands over 14 days, from Kyushu down south to Hokkaido in the north; the cruise is capped at 148 passengers, making for a favorable guest-to-guide ratio. After a precruise stay at the Ritz-Carlton Osaka, the itinerary includes private performances by Kodo *taiko* drummers and geishas, strolls among cherry blossoms and bonsai trees, and visits to castles and temples, such as the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto. In Hiroshima, travelers have the opportunity for quiet contemplation at the memorial museum and garden, and lectures and presentations onboard put everything into context. *From $25,695, abercrombiekent.com*

Kyoto's Golden Pavilion

The colonial town of Mompox

COLOMBIA

AmaWaterways

In 2025, AmaWaterways became the first major cruise line to offer multiday trips along Colombia's Magdalena River, the storied body of water that inspired many of author Gabriel García Márquez's works. Passengers visit the colonial town of Mompox and the "floating" village of Nueva Venecia, or "New Venice," where houses are built on stilts, and get a taste of the country's blend of African, Indigenous, and European cultures during *cumbia* and *vallenato* music performances. Bird-watchers may spot sapphire-bellied hummingbirds and northern screamers, so named for their high-pitched call. The ships—which feature 60 to 64 cabins, a spa treatment room, and a sundeck with a pool—sail between Cartagena and Barranquilla, with optional precruise nights in Medellín or a postcruise extension in Panama City, about a 75-minute flight from Cartagena. *From $3,089, amawaterways.com*

FROM TOP: GEOFF HAGGRAY; UWE BERGWITZ/SHUTTERSTOCK

Le Commandant Charcot

JULIEN FABRO

CANADA

Ponant

There's nothing as thrilling as cutting through yards-thick sheets of ice aboard Ponant's *Le Commandant Charcot*, the world's only luxury icebreaker. Earlier this year, the 245-passenger hybrid electric vessel became the first ship to sail Canada's St. Lawrence River in the boreal winter season. Ponant will return to this route in 2027 with 15-day itineraries that kick off in Québec City and continue on to the Saguenay Fjord, the Gaspé Peninsula, and the French territory of St. Pierre and Miquelon, off the coast of Newfoundland. While ashore, guests go dogsledding and ice fishing, and experience modern First Nations culture during a visit to an Innu community, where they can shop for moccasins, watch traditional dance, and sample bannock, a biscuit-like bread. St. Lawrence sailings tend to book up quickly, but other icy adventures aboard *Le Commandant Charcot* include ones to Greenland, Svalbard, and even the North Pole. *From $25,850, ponant.com*

SeaDream's *inflatable waterslide*

CARIBBEAN

SeaDream Yacht Club

Escape to some of the Caribbean's most exclusive beach clubs and secluded ports, such as Low Bay, Barbuda, and South Friar's Bay on St. Kitts, with SeaDream Yacht Club, which calls itself the originator of modern yacht cruising. SeaDream's two ships each have 56 rooms and an impressive array of culinary choices, including ample vegan dishes and a well-stocked wine cellar. By day, hit up the water sports platform to kayak, snorkel, wakeboard, or ride Jet Skis, or check out the slide that descends from the pool deck; after sunset, watch an outdoor movie or relax under the stars on a cushioned daybed. On shore, the crew leads organized outings like hiking among boulders and wading into sea caves at the Baths on Virgin Gorda or snorkeling along marked routes in Virgin Islands National Park. *From $3,299, seadream.com*

NORTHWEST PASSAGE

Aurora Expeditions

The seriously intrepid can venture through Canada's Northwest Passage with the seasoned polar experts at Aurora Expeditions. In 2026, the line is offering a 29-day voyage that sails from Nuuk, Greenland, all the way to Nome, Alaska; the following year will include two 16-day itineraries through the islands and icy channels of Canada's High Arctic aboard the 130-passenger *Greg Mortimer*, one of a new class of ships that pair adventure cruising with luxury amenities and accommodations. Hike on Devon Island, the world's largest uninhabited island, and visit remote Inuit settlements in the Canadian territory of Nunavut. Wildlife lovers can watch for polar bears, walruses, and beluga whales aboard one of 15 Zodiacs or from a hydraulic-powered platform that extends directly over the water from the side of the ship. *From $21,036, aurora-expeditions.com*

The wilds of Devon Island, Nunavut

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF SEADREAM YACHT CLUB; ALBERT KNAPP/ALAMY

Dream Ice
Handmade Ice Cream
Die natürliche Glace aus Allschwil

Basel, Switzerland

JULIA NIMKE

RHINE RIVER

National Geographic–Lindblad Expeditions

Lindblad has been mounting voyages to such iconic rivers as the Amazon and the Nile for more than 50 years. In 2026, the cruise line—which has a long-term partnership with National Geographic—brings their joint expertise in deeper exploration to the Rhine River, with eight-day itineraries that sail between Basel, Switzerland, and Cologne, Germany, or Amsterdam and Brussels, on the new, 120-passenger *Connect*. Special touches include after-hours visits to Dutch museums; a chance to break bread with university students in Heidelberg, Germany; and access to an accompanying National Geographic photographer who provides shooting tips during the trip. *From $6,450, expeditions.com*

London's Tower Bridge

NORTHERN EUROPE

Atlas Ocean Voyages

Thanks to the compact size of its 200-passenger, yacht-style ships, Atlas Ocean Voyages is changing the way cruise passengers experience northern Europe. That means round-trip sailings from London's Tower Bridge dock on the Thames, and access to other urban ports where larger ships can't fit. Highlights of these expeditions include visits to the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki and the British Library in London, where items on display range from Leonardo da Vinci's notebook to handwritten lyrics by the Beatles. Literary types can descend into the 8,000-year-old lava cave in Iceland's Snæfellsjökull glacier that inspired Jules Verne's novel *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, while history buffs will marvel at the interactive recreation of the construction of the *Titanic* at the Belfast shipyard. And, in Edinburgh, the especially brave get the chance to play bagpipes with Scotland's national piper, Louise Marshall, who has entertained queens, popes, and celebrities. *From $4,019, atlasoceanvoyages.com*

Ha Long Bay, Vietnam

EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Seabourn

The luxury cruise line Seabourn offers a 22-day "Southeast Asia Explorer" itinerary aboard its 600-passenger *Seabourn Encore* with stops in Tokyo, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Singapore. Take in the views of Hong Kong on an evening tram ride up Victoria Peak; go shopping with a chef in Ho Chi Minh City's famed Ben Thanh Market; or head out on a guided, overnight side trip to Cambodia's awe-inspiring temples for an extra fee before rejoining the cruise. During the 10 sea days between ports, travelers enjoy five onboard restaurants, expansive spa treatments and wellness options, and spacious suites that are up to 1,300 square feet. *From $9,944, seabourn.com* Ⓐ

FROM TOP: BRYAN DAUGHERTY; ZACH SEARCY/UNSPLASH

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CONNECT

Mastering the Art of French Eating

*On a trip along the Vallée de la Gastronomie, Afar's director of podcasts, **Aislyn Greene**, reconnects with the food, wine, and people she first fell in love with decades ago.*

Illustrations by Holly Wales

Dijon
Marey-lès-Fussey
Charolles
Ardèche
Marseille

I'VE LOVED FRANCE since I was seven and my aunt gifted me a poster of the Seine River at night. That poster, which hung on my wall for years, is still with me—stained, creased, and faded with time—because it was the first image that made me think of other places, other people, and other lives. That unknown filled me with wonder. I started chasing my travel dreams as a teen, eventually landing, in my mid-20s, in the Brittany region of northwest France.

There were long lunches—tomato tarts, neat green salads, pungent cheeses—capped with espressos in Rennes, the capital city, and weekends seeking out salted caramel and tiny strawberries and oysters in coastal Cancale. I was astounded by the casual hyperlocality of it all, by families who spent generations handing down the legacy of cheese-making, baking, and making wine.

This trip was the first time I learned to make the connection between the food I ate and the place it came from. So when I moved back to California after a year in France, I started working more with food. I got a job at a wine bar; I learned how to bake and cook.

But that was two decades ago, and the threads that tied me to France had begun to fray. My French fluency had faded. And while food was still a big part of my life, I'd been feeling less and less connected to its origins.

Then I learned about the Vallée de la Gastronomie. Created in 2020 to celebrate the local offerings of more than 400 producers and small farmers, the roughly 385-mile trail begins in Burgundy and ends in Provence, passing through the country's most iconic gastronomic regions. Traveling along the route felt like a way to fast-track my reconnection with France, an opportunity to not only consume its iconic cheeses, seafood, wine, and pastries, but to meet the people honoring the past and quite literally crafting the future. And so I boarded a plane, six days of eating and drinking ahead of me.

WHEN I WALK INTO La Maison aux Mille Truffes in Marey-lès-Fussey, 35 minutes outside of Dijon, it's clear that I'm in a sort of truffle Disneyland. There's a truffle demonstration center, a truffle-focused restaurant, and a shop filled with truffle products that range from expected (truffle-infused dried pasta) to unappetizing-to-me (truffle ice cream). All of La Maison's truffles come from within a 125-mile radius, and in a few minutes I'll be hunting for them.

As my guide Nicolas Jeanroy preps his truffle gear, which looks like a collection of garden tools, his canine partner, Taïga, bounds up. At nine months old, she seems much too bouncy to excavate what is arguably the world's most precious fungus, though Jeanroy—with a wink—assures me she only occasionally damages them as she learns the ropes.

Jeanroy tells me that animals are the only ones who can smell truffles in the wild, located up to a foot underground near tree roots, and that by law in France, hunters can only use pigs and dogs to find them.

"This breed is called—*ta ta ta*—Lagotto Romagnolo," he trills in an over-the-top Italian accent, as a tribute to the mop-headed dog. This means that it's finally Taïga's time to shine. We troop out to La Maison's large, wooded backyard, where birds chirp and sunlight filters through the leaves. Taïga bounces through the long grass like Pepé Le Pew in a *Looney Tunes* cartoon until suddenly, she's all business, making a beeline for a spot near one of the trees and pawing at the earth.

Jeanroy squats down, nudges Taïga aside, and starts digging with a *cavadou*—a sort of pick that resembles a very scary dental tool. He carefully scrapes around a truffle the size of a small apple, which he pulls out from the earth with a cinematic flourish. The truffle looks like . . . nothing much. Just a dirt-covered orb that only an animal could find. And yet, it can be sold for more than $300 a pound.

A few hours later, this very truffle is turned into my lunch: It appears in a slab of truffle butter on bread, and then in a creamy sauce blanketing delicate cod. For dessert, I use my own truffle "spade" (an elongated spoon) to dig through a layer of chocolate to access cream-filled black profiteroles. It's a playful nod, but one that sparks real reflection and appreciation: for the truffle, for Taïga, for my time learning more about where my food comes from.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, 74 miles southwest of Marey-lès-Fussey, I stand in a field near Charolles, watching Charolais cows graze. I've never seen so much bovine personality. Wispy tufts of hair on the top of their heads give them kind of a punk look, and their fur is the color of Brie.

Meeting the cows is an essential part of the experience at Maison Doucet, a five-star Relais & Châteaux hotel with a Michelin-starred restaurant that's known for its all-beef tasting menu. That means I'm looking at a future meal—one that will be prepared by chef Frédéric Doucet, who grew up in the hotel and now owns it and runs the restaurant.

Doucet says that he takes a humane approach to his cattle, moving the animals from field to field so they're used to new places and aren't as frightened when it's time to end their lives. As a former vegetarian, I find it difficult to look my dinner in the eye, but the cows are seemingly content, ambling through sunlit golden fields as farmhands roll up bales of hay.

I ponder my own discomfort as I eat beef tartlets and tendon soup later that evening—and this bigger idea that we should see the fruits, vegetables, and animals we'll consume before they get to our plate. After all, it's easy to be disconnected from the process. Meat is often wrapped and divorced from its origins. Salads are bagged, fruit is precut. Convenience reigns. France is in no way immune to those influences, but in this moment, it feels like the connections between farm and table have remained strong.

THE NEXT DAY, 190 miles south of Maison Doucet, I find myself 328 feet beneath the surface of the Earth. I pick my way through La Grotte Saint-Marcel, a cave in Ardèche, feeling like a Ghostbuster in a full-body green suit. It's dark and damp and smells like the sidewalk after a spring rain.

I shuffle along with just a tiny light attached to my helmet, illuminating stalactites dangling like earthen fingers and stalagmites stretching up as if to meet them. I'm not scared, exactly, but I feel unsettled, my senses scrambled. And then I hear Jézabel Janvre say: "We'll taste two wines coming from the surface and two other wines coming from the cave. And we do the Speleoenology to show you the power of winetasting in a cave."

Janvre is a guide with Speleoenology, a mashup of spelunking and winetasting; walking next to her is company cofounder Raphaël Pommier, who ages his wine in local caves.

Our spelunking guide tells us that there are 40 miles of galleries to explore, and I'm surprised by how quickly I've become comfortable in this cave. I feel as though I could walk forever, but we are here to taste wine—and as Janvre and Pommier remind me, we must hike out afterward.

We settle into an enclave with natural stone benches, and Pommier and Janvre start pulling bottles out of their backpacks. First, they pour a local mineral water to cleanse the palate, and then comes the initial round of wines. But before we taste, we must turn off our lights.

I've never been in such darkness. I can't even see the outline of my hand. A fear grips me—that primal sense that something might be lurking in the pitch black, even though our spelunking guide assures us the cave contains no organic life. I feel as though I've been cleaved from my body, that there's nothing left of me but my thoughts. This utter darkness, however, is crucial to the tasting.

Janvre hands me a glass of a red blend, and I'm immediately plunked back into my body and shocked by what I can smell. With my sight obscured, the aromas practically bounce out of the glass and into my nostrils. I can smell the wine—sun-warmed strawberries, violets, and an herb I can't identify—even when I lower the glass to my waist, or to where I think my waist might be. Focusing on tasting also helps keep my fear in check: I'm not worrying about what might be hiding in the dark but rather zeroing in on the olfactory journey—an observation that doesn't surprise Pommier. He's found most people want to immediately turn the lights back on, that they can't stand the dark. But once they start tasting, they forget their fear.

> **"We could spend half an hour just tasting wine in the dark, because in fact we are not losing senses."**

"We could spend half an hour just tasting wine in the dark, because in fact we are not losing senses," he says. "We're still connected."

MARSEILLE, MY FINAL STOP, is known for many things: seafood (thanks to its coastal location), size (the second-largest city in France), and boat-shaped cookies known as *navettes*.

According to legend, the cookies represent the ship that carried three important saints—Mary Magdalene, Martha, and Lazarus—to Provence more than 2,000 years ago. But don't refer to them as a Provence cookie, says José Orsoni, the baker-owner of Les Navettes des Accoules, his family bakery. "They're not Provençal," he insists. "They're Marseillais."

Orsoni has salt-and-pepper hair and an exaggerated, slightly mischievous energy. I've arrived too late in the day to witness any baking—"You must come at 5 a.m. for that, not 5 p.m.!"—but he hands me three confections, including his navette, made of flour, sugar, butter, eggs, salt, and orange blossom water. It tastes light, divine. It is the kind of cookie I could eat a million of and feel that it's a vaguely healthy thing.

Orsoni is closing for the day, so he invites me for a glass of wine in the small plaza next to the bakery. Lighting a cigarette, he tells me about the history of the area, about the tunnels beneath the city. Person after person comes by, shouting something to Orsoni. It feels fitting to end my trip here, with him, someone so passionate about culinary tradition. Our Provençal white wine arrives, and as we lift our glasses in a toast—"*Santé! Santé!*"—I tip my head back, and drink it all in. Ⓐ

Aislyn Greene is Afar's director of podcasts. Artist and illustrator Holly Wales is based in the U.K.

CANA
WILD

CANADA'S

Métis Crossing, Smoky Lake

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PARAGON II

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(Left): A catamaran with Sail Maui embarks on an excursion off the coast of Maui, Hawai'i. (Top) A person explores the woods using an all-terain wheelchair with Power to Be in Victoria, British Columbia. (Bottom left) An Indigenous man conducts a traditional Kalapuya ceremony in Eugene, Oregon. (Bottom right) A woman welcomes guests to an international cooking class with League of Kitchens in New York City.

CHOOSE YOUR OWN

EPIC ADVENTURE

BRIAN FLAHERTY

Epic trips come in all shapes and sizes—you don't need to summit the tallest peak or hike the deepest canyon to find travel that pushes your limits. And you don't need to go that far from home. We've collected 15 experiences across the United States, divided among five ecosystems: mountains (p.42), lakes and rivers (p.48), deserts (p.52), cities (p.56), and oceans (p.60). For each, trip ideas run the gamut from low-key outings (beach camping and bird-watching) to multiday itineraries that are guaranteed to get the adrenaline pumping (packrafting and canyoneering). Whether it's tracking wolves in Yellowstone or mountain biking in the middle of a city, find your next stateside adventure here.

BY NICHOLAS DERENZO
AND TERRY WARD

AMERICA 250

View synchronous fireflies in the Great Smoky Mountains

TENNESSEE

Photinus carolinus is not your average lightning bug: This Appalachian insect is one of only a few species of synchronous fireflies, which means that they coordinate their bioluminescent flashes in timed patterns of light and darkness during mating season (between May and June), resulting in something of a living, choreographed holiday light display. They've become so popular that, in 2006, Great Smoky Mountains National Park instituted a lottery system to control crowds at the Elkmont area, during the predicted eight-day peak. The lottery opens in early May on *recreation.gov*, and only 120 cars per night gain entry ($1 to register, plus a $29 fee if selected). Firefly watchers can camp within the park—or, if they're looking for more amenities, book a glamping tent at Under Canvas Great Smoky Mountains (35 minutes away by car) or a cottage at the luxury adventure and wellness resort Blackberry Farm (45 minutes away).

MOUNTAINS

DANAE WOLFE

Go ice climbing in the Rockies

COLORADO

Come wintertime, when the Colorado slopes are buried in fresh powder, there are paths less taken than skiing or snowboarding. Renowned adventure travel outfitter Eleven runs two exclusive lodges (Scarp Ridge Lodge and Sopris House) in the former mining town of Crested Butte and offers such excursions as fat-tire biking on groomed trails and snowshoeing through aspen glades. The most thrilling way to take in these alpine landscapes, however, may be ice climbing. Travelers strap on crampons and then use an ice axe to chart a course up a glacier-blue waterfall frozen mid-cascade. Eleven's expert guides help guests tackle some of the roughly 100 routes at an ice-climbing park about 80 miles south in Lake City, where piped-in water assures something to challenge every skill level, or slightly farther afield in Ouray (pictured), which evokes Switzerland with its jagged, often snow-covered peaks. Either way, that hot-tub soak back at the lodge will feel well-earned.

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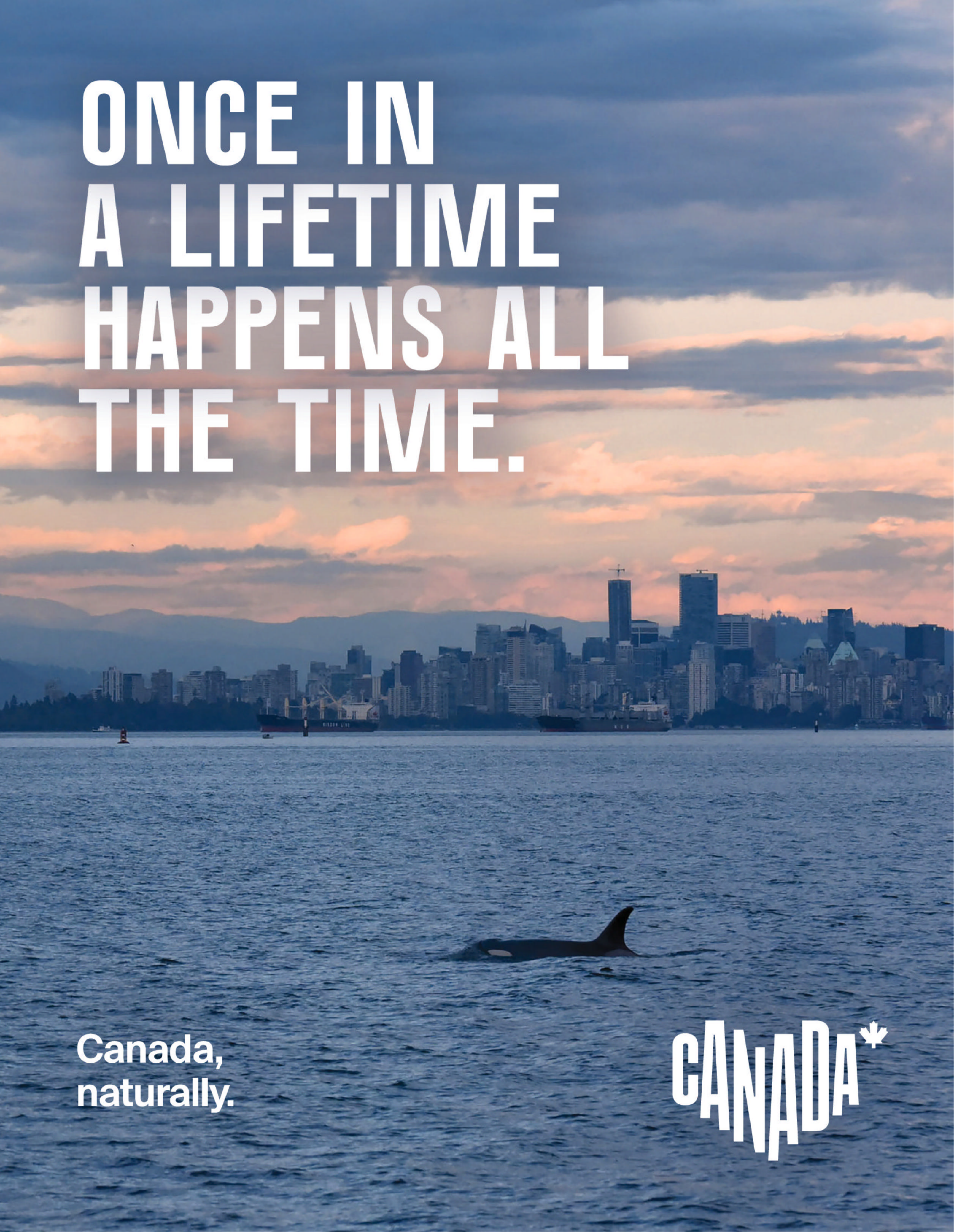
NPS PHOTO/ALAMY

Track gray wolf packs in Yellowstone National Park

WYOMING

The wide-open valleys of Yellowstone have earned the park the nickname “America’s Serengeti,” so it’s no wonder that there are safari-style offerings to match. Gray wolves were reintroduced to the park 30 years ago, and wildlife lovers hoping to encounter the apex predators today can do so in style with luxury tour operator Abercrombie & Kent, which leads multiday wolf-tracking journeys. Peak season occurs each winter from November through March, and the outfitter suggests seven days to see both Yellowstone and Jackson Hole, an hour’s drive south of the park. Customizable itineraries can involve low-altitude flights over the geothermally shaped landscape; game drives through the snow to see bison, elk, and moose; a horse-drawn sleigh ride to a riverside camp; and private sessions with wolf biologists to learn about the triumphs and challenges of species reintroduction. The après-wolf scene back at base camp—the Four Seasons Resort and Residences Jackson Hole, or Sage Lodge in Montana’s Paradise Valley—might include time sipping a locally distilled whiskey next to a roaring fire, the sound of howls in the distance.


ONCE IN
A LIFETIME
HAPPENS ALL
THE TIME.
Canada,
naturally.
CANADA

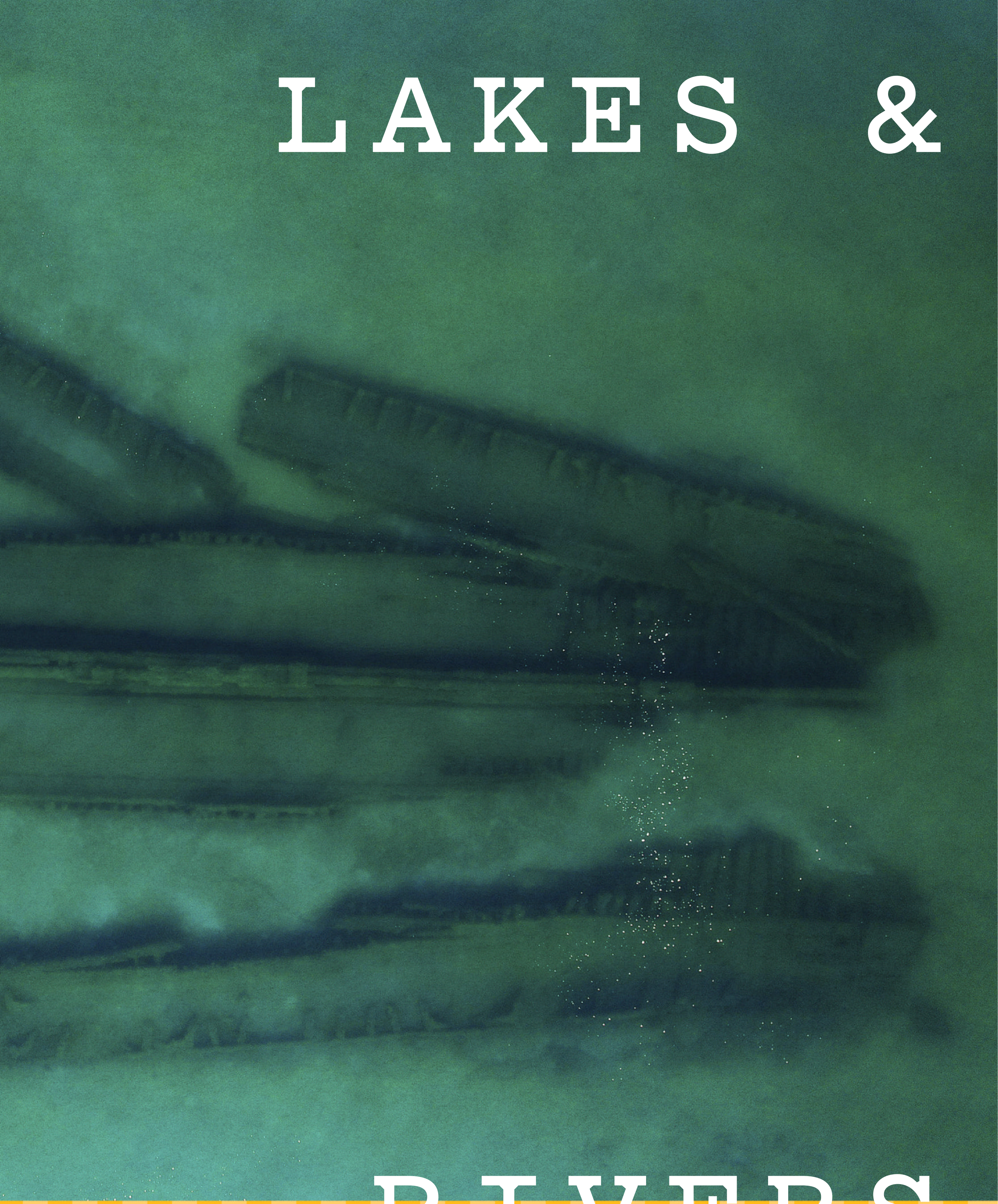
Dive shipwrecks in a Great Lake

MICHIGAN

Eric Billips, the owner of Lake Michigan adventure outfitter Beulah Outdoors, has scuba dived all around the world, but he says there's nothing quite like exploring the Great Lakes—and the thousands of immaculately preserved shipwrecks that rest below the surface of their cold waters. From the village of Beulah, 45 minutes west of Traverse City, Billips and his crew provide all gear (including wetsuits) and take certified divers to sites within the Manitou Passage Underwater Preserve. Permanently at rest here are historic ships such as the *Alva Bradley* (pictured), an 1870s schooner that met its demise in an 1894 gale, and the *Three Brothers*, an 1888 lumber freighter that sits in just 15 feet of water and is accessed via a shallow-water beach entry from South Manitou Island. Nearby lies the *Francisco Morazan*, a 247-foot-long freighter that smashed into the rocks during a 1960 snowstorm; on the same tank, divers can drop by the *Walter L. Frost*, a wooden steamer that ran aground in 1903, and keep an eye out for cold-water fish that congregate on the wrecks, such as eel-like burbots. Traverse City serves as an activity-filled base, with indie shops, wineries, and charming stays, like the Scandinavian-inspired cabins at Koti.

CHRIS ROXBURGH

LAKES & RIVERS



Snorkel with manatees in Crystal River

FLORIDA

About an hour-and-a-half drive north of Tampa, the 177-acre Crystal River National Wildlife Refuge protects the habitat of the state's beloved native marine mammal, the Florida manatee. From mid-November through March, manatees make their way from the gulf and ocean into warmer spring-fed rivers and bays. The refuge, including Kings Bay and Three Sisters Springs, is the only place in North America where it's legal to enter the water to swim and snorkel with manatees. Paddletail Waterfront Adventures offers three-hour private and group guided excursions, and while it's not permitted to approach the manatees, visitors are often surprised to find the gentle giants sidling up for a closer look—which is allowed as long as it's the animals doing the approaching. The outfitter runs a 113-room lodge with its own hot tub and swimming pool, but those looking for something a bit more luxurious can drive about 40 miles northeast to the city of Ocala and its Equestrian Hotel, which has a spa and steakhouse and is part of the largest equestrian competition complex in the United States.

Flightsee and packraft through Wrangell–St. Elias National Park & Preserve

ALASKA

Set in south central Alaska, Wrangell–St. Elias National Park & Preserve is a landscape of epic proportions: The largest U.S. national park sprawls across more than 13.2 million acres, bigger than Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey, and Rhode Island combined. It's best known for its great heights (nine out of the 16 tallest peaks in the U.S.), but equally impressive are its vast interior waterways, including electric-blue alpine ponds and glacier-fed rivers. Out in these unforgiving wilds, the five-cabin Ultima Thule Lodge (open May through September) is a beacon of backcountry luxury on the banks of the raging Chitina River. Guests arrive via bush plane and join pilots for daylong flightseeing tours. During one-of-a-kind trips, there are no preplanned itineraries, and visitors instead go with the flow, often quite literally: Activities might include fishing for salmon, watching a herd of bison, or packrafting, a sport that involves hiking with a lightweight inflatable boat on your back and then using it to paddle across a body of water. The lodge itself is rife with creature comforts, including a yurt with exercise equipment and a library, a wood-fire cedar sauna, and an organic garden that provides produce for the kitchen to pair with wild-caught game and salmon.

FROM TOP: JOEY SOLOMON; BRIAN FLAHERTY

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Hike under a full moon in White Sands National Park

NEW MEXICO

At any time of day, White Sands National Park in southern New Mexico looks otherworldly: Its dunes comprise 4.5 billion tons of soft, powdery gypsum sand, which collect into piles as tall as 60 feet. During a full moon, the effect is even more surreal, with lunar light so bright that it casts shadows. From March through November, visitors can immerse themselves in this alien planet landscape, a 100-mile drive from the El Paso airport, on monthly moonlit hikes, when they spend roughly two hours clambering up and down steep dunes with rangers. Tickets go on sale one month before the day of the tour on *recreation.gov* and tend to sell out quickly ($8 for adults 16 and older). Those who don't snag a spot can enjoy the park after dark in other ways: Hours are extended as late as 11 p.m. for special Full Moon Night events, which include ranger-led talks on such topics as fossilized footprints, and live music from the likes of the 1st Armored Division Rock Band. As campsites are being refurbished, a convenient lodging option is the Spanish colonial–style Hotel Encanto de Las Cruces, an hour's drive southwest, where hikers fuel up with *chilaquiles* made with Chimayó red or Hatch green chilies.

THIS PAGE: BRENDAN GEORGE KO. OPPOSITE PAGE: COURTESY OF RED DESERT ADVENTURE

Explore Greater Zion slot canyons with your family

UTAH

Sculpted by flash floods and the sands of time, Utah's sublime slot canyons are best appreciated by entering their striated depths, where the only move is forward. The sport of canyoneering involves rappelling, down-climbing, wading, and stemming, or stretching your arms and legs across the narrowest section of a canyon and using pressure to slowly progress. Red Desert Adventure leads private guided trips in the Greater Zion area—with routes immediately outside the national park boundary and others within about a 20-mile radius—where the scenery is just as spectacular and often less crowded. Itineraries can be tailored for all skill levels: Half-day tours into sandstone slot canyons including Lambs Knoll and Yankee Doodle feature rappels in the 70-foot range, ideal for first-timers and families. (Kids must be at least five years old.) More challenging canyoneering trips, like Eye of the Needle, require multiple rappels up to 200 feet in a flowing watercourse and an ascent back up from the canyon floor using steel cables affixed to the sandstone. A 90-minute drive away, Amangiri makes for a high-design homebase, from which guests can continue their desert exploration with Navajo-led walks through Upper Antelope Canyon.

Ride horses through Oregon's high desert

OREGON

Stretching eastward from the foothills of the Cascade Range, Central Oregon's high desert ("high" due to its average elevation of 4,000 feet) is characterized by volcanic ash and rocks, sagebrush and juniper trees—a unique, thriving landscape in muted browns and dusty greens. Take in the sights and sounds of the region on a horseback adventure at Brasada Ranch, which comprises family-friendly cabins, modern bungalows, and Western-tinged guest rooms and suites 20 miles outside of Bend. Knowledgeable wranglers lead family pony rides and more advanced trail forays across the property's 1,800 acres atop American quarter horses. Along the way, guides teach riders about the area's history, volcanology, and hydrology (it receives less than 11 inches of rainfall annually). Back at the ranch, guests can relax at the pool or lazy river, gather for fireside s'mores, or dine on locally sourced ingredients such as venison and berries at Wild Rye restaurant, which champions campfire and open-range cooking.

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CITIES

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JONATHAN MERRING

Mountain bike in and around downtown Richmond

VIRGINIA

Richmond and its surroundings offer some of the best urban biking in the country. Particularly convenient is Belle Isle (pictured), in the middle of the James River near downtown. Accessible by footbridge, the 54-acre island was home to a 19th-century iron and nail works factory before it became a prisoner of war camp for Union soldiers during the Civil War and then a city park in 1973. Today, it features a skills area where cyclists maneuver around obstacles (logs, drop-offs, old granite curbstones) and a pumptrack, a looped circuit where they build up momentum on banked turns in order to ride without pedaling; the outdoorsy playground also includes a granite cliff for rock climbing and a quarry pond for fishing. Guests at the 130-year-old Jefferson Hotel can borrow an upright Dutch-style bike to tool around the city, and those wishing to tackle mountain-biking trails will find rentable wheels (including e-bikes) at Riverside Cycling. Beyond Richmond's city limits, Pocahontas State Park, 20 miles south of downtown, has trails designed specifically for off-road handcycles and trikes, which are popular among athletes with lower-limb mobility impairments.

Spot rare species with the NYC Bird Alliance

NEW YORK

Want to view more than just pigeons on your next trip to the Big Apple? The NYC Bird Alliance offers hundreds of outings and classes throughout the year across all five boroughs (usually $42 for nonmembers, though most are free). The city is a surprising avian hot spot, thanks to its varied ecosystems and convenient location along migratory routes. Depending on the season, visitors might encounter bald eagles, wild turkeys, and even attention-grabbing rarities such as snowy owls and puffin-like razorbills. Guided tours bring bird-watchers new and seasoned to spaces including Brooklyn Bridge Park and the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, plus less expected spots like public housing complexes; themed outings include Black Birders Week, Let's Go Birding Together (LGBT) events, and accessible itineraries for wheelchair and walker users. DIY nature lovers can consult the organization's "birding by subway" guide, which maps out 30 places reachable by public transit. After a tour, keep wildlife-watching from a tent or cabin at Collective Retreats Governors Island, which is open May to October on a 172-acre island in New York Harbor that attracts hawks, woodpeckers, herons, and more.

Tackle a *via ferrata* in the Ohio capital

OHIO

Born in the Alps during World War I, *via ferrata* (Italian for "iron path") is a form of climbing that involves clipping into a cable system and traversing cliffs and mountains using rungs, steps, ladders, and bridges anchored into the rocks. These routes are gaining popularity in wild areas such as the Rockies and the red-rock deserts of Utah, but the country's first urban via ferrata is found just a 15-minute drive from the Ohio Statehouse in Columbus. Quarry Trails Metro Park opened in 2021 on the site of the quarry that provided limestone to build many downtown landmarks, and it includes a 25-foot waterfall, mountain-biking trails, and a 1,040-foot via ferrata, complete with aerial walkways and a bridge suspended 105 feet over a pond below. Prospective climbers can register on *metroparks.net* for a free, 90-minute guided experience with the Metro Parks Outdoor Adventure team. They should base themselves downtown at the 198-room Junto Hotel, which has a gear garage that provides guests with GoPro cameras to record a climb well done.

FROM TOP: CAROLINE TOMPKINS; ADAM CAIRNS

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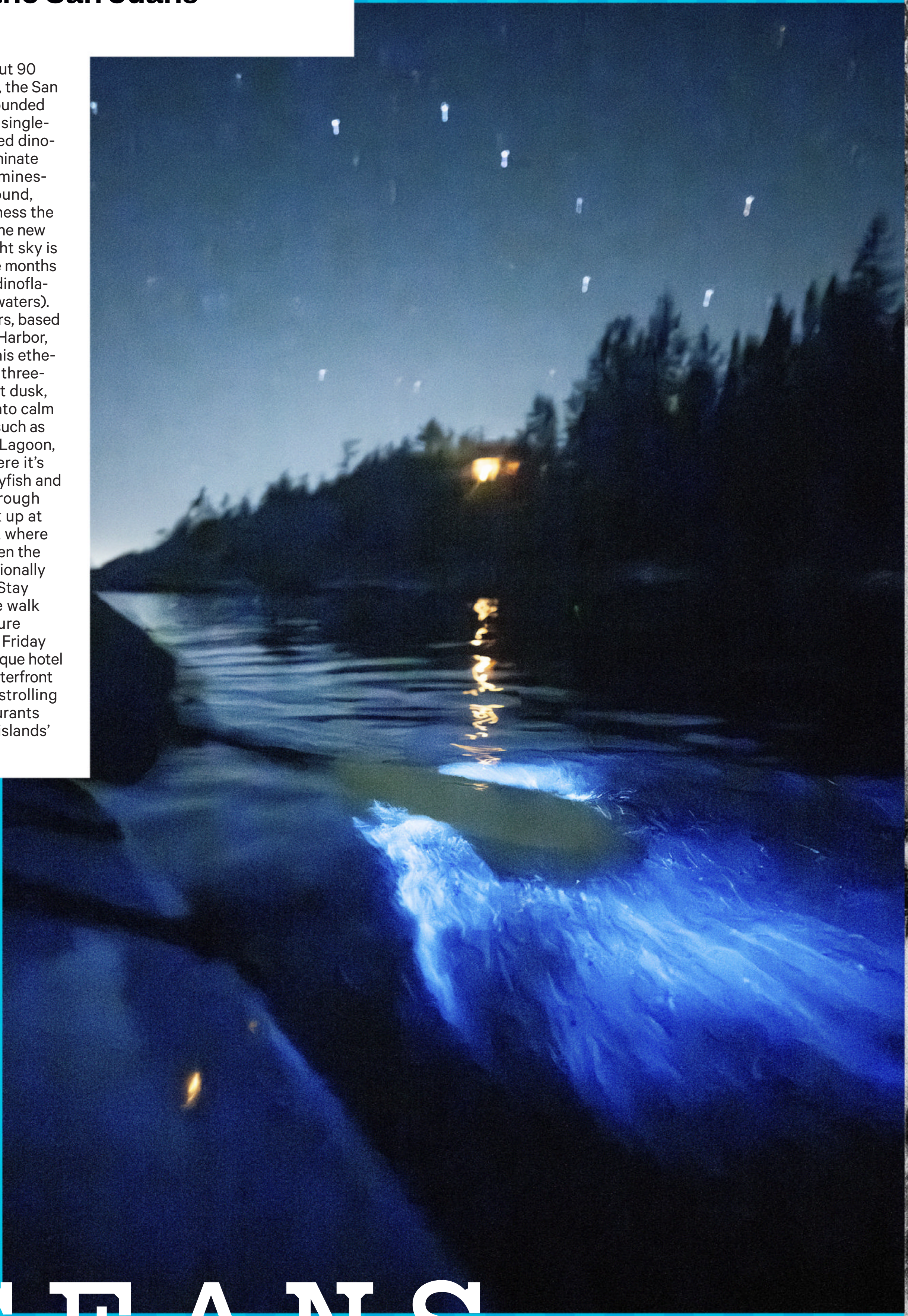
Sea kayak in the bioluminescent waters of the San Juans

WASHINGTON

In the Salish Sea, about 90 miles north of Seattle, the San Juan Islands are surrounded by waters fertile with single-celled organisms called dinoflagellates, which illuminate when touched. Bioluminescence occurs year-round, but it's easiest to witness the phenomenon during the new moon—when the night sky is darkest—between the months of June and August (dinoflagellates like warmer waters). Sea Quest Kayak Tours, based in the town of Friday Harbor, takes advantage of this ethereal spectacle during three-hour paddling trips. At dusk, guides lead visitors into calm nooks around places such as Dinner Island, Argyle Lagoon, and Mulno Cove, where it's possible to watch jellyfish and shrimp swimming through the bluish glow. Look up at the sky's canopy, too, where shooting stars and even the aurora borealis occasionally get in on the action. Stay about a three-minute walk from the tour departure point, at the 24-room Friday Harbor House, a boutique hotel with fireplaces and waterfront balconies; it's within strolling distance of the restaurants and breweries of the islands' biggest town.



OCEANS

Beach-camp near wild horses on Assateague Island

MARYLAND

Straddling the Maryland-Virginia boundary, Assateague Island National Seashore consists of a 37-mile-long barrier island that's accessed by one of two small bridges and populated by a herd of about 80 feral horses. While some believe these local icons descend from survivors of a Spanish shipwreck 500 years ago, they were more likely brought here by 17th-century farmers hoping to skirt fencing and taxation laws. Visitors can explore the island's sandy beaches and salt marshes by hiking, biking, paddling, surf-fishing, or crabbing, but equine enthusiasts hoping to get the best view of the majestic creatures should spend the night in a tent right on the sand; reservations are bookable on *recreation.gov*, starting at $40 for standard tent sites. Because the horses roam free, they might be seen wandering among the campsites, running through the surf, grazing on salt marsh cordgrass, or tending to newborn foals, who usually arrive in late spring. In July of 2025, the local fire department hosted its 100th annual Pony Swim, which sees "Saltwater Cowboys" round up the herd and swim them a few minutes across the channel to neighboring Chincoteague Island, where some of the foals are auctioned off to maintain herd size and to raise funds for veterinary care.

THIS PAGE: DANNY BLOOM. OPPOSITE PAGE: CHONA KASINGER

Sail aboard a historic windjammer

MAINE

There may be no more magical way to take in the New England coastline than by sailing with the Maine Windjammer Association, a fleet of new and historic schooners and ketches, the oldest of which dates back to 1871. Three- to six-day itineraries depart mid-May through mid-October from the picturesque MidCoast towns of Camden and Rockland (private charters are also available). Stops might include Swan's Island, where guests can hike out to a well-preserved 1870s lighthouse, or Deer Isle, which is home to a thriving artist community. Because there are only 16 to 31 guests per ship, captains often invite inquisitive passengers to take the helm with their guidance or to help raise and lower sails, as crew members share their love of seafaring. Once the vessel has anchored in a cove, possible evening activities include lobster bakes on the beach or impromptu leaps from the bowsprit into the bracing Atlantic Ocean. Afterward, retire to your onboard cabin, where tight quarters (some have bunk beds) often get an extra splash of charm from additions like nautical artworks or warm wool blankets. Ⓐ

AMY WELCH-OLSON

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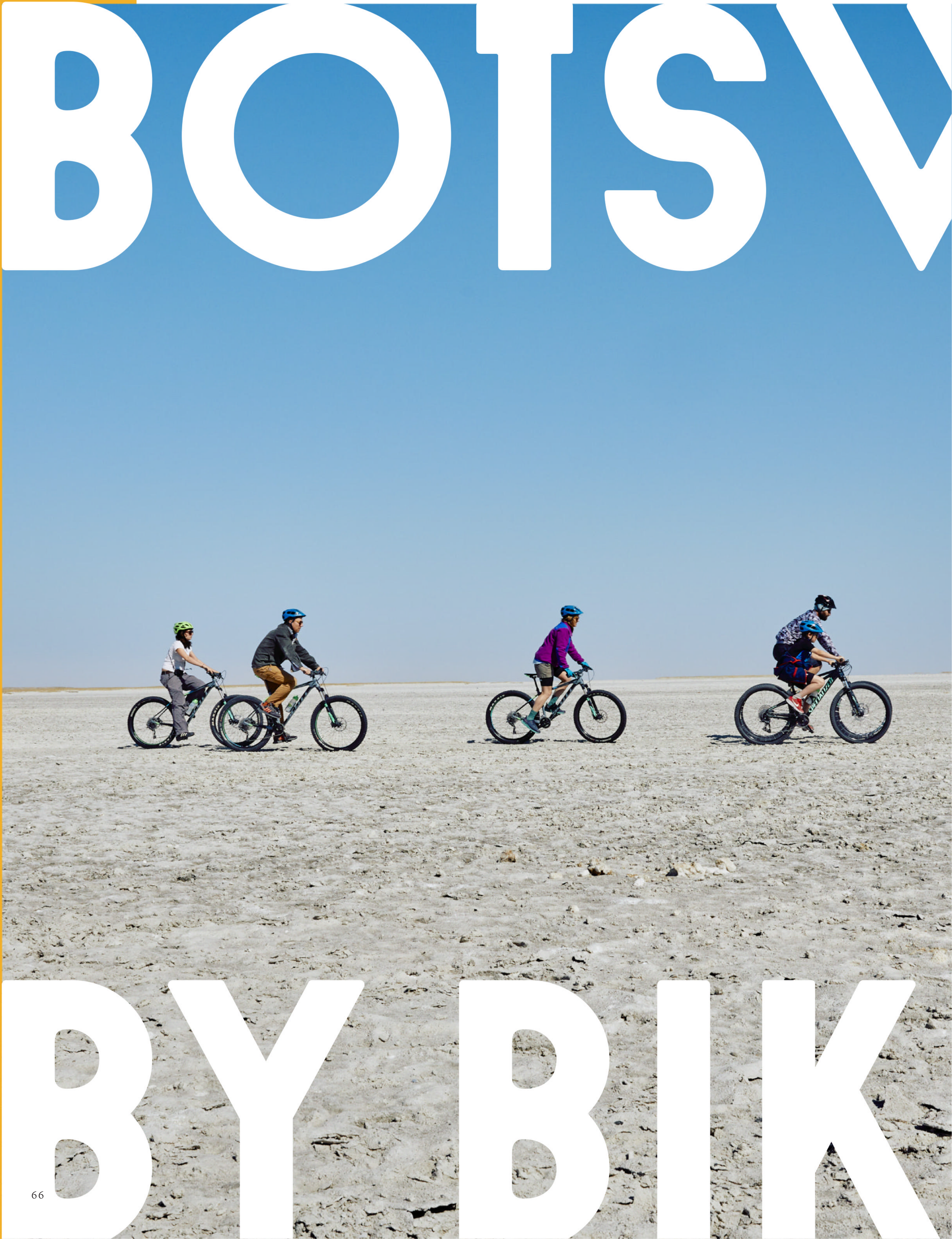

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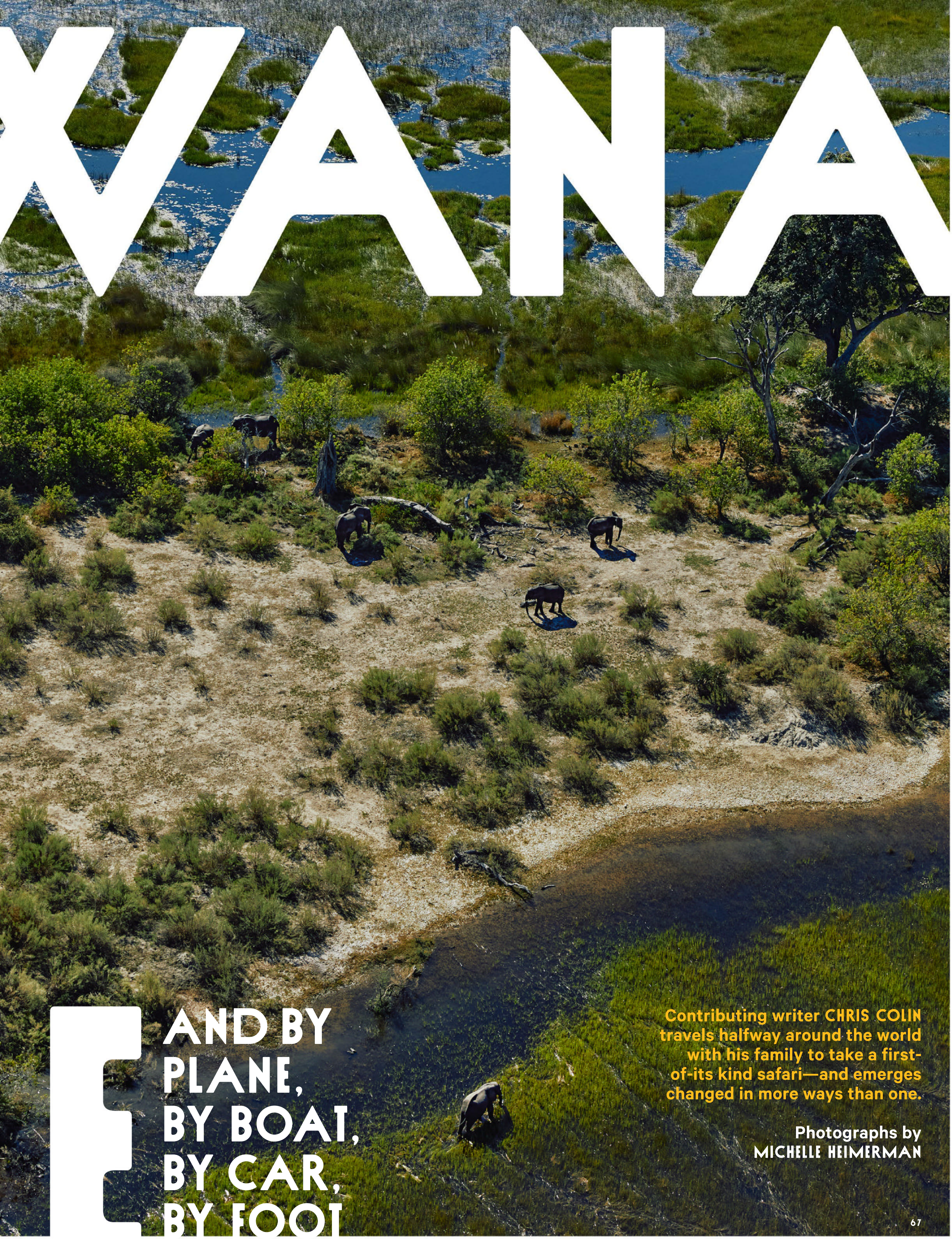

WANA

E AND BY PLANE, BY BOAT, BY CAR, BY FOOT

Contributing writer **CHRIS COLIN** travels halfway around the world with his family to take a first-of-its kind safari—and emerges changed in more ways than one.

Photographs by **MICHELLE HEIMERMAN**

AN HOUR INTO THE BUSH

AND A DUNG BEETLE had already pushed its namesake orb across our path. From a purple-pod terminalia tree a crimson-breasted shrike pontificated at us. A small croc in a muddy pond eyed us crossly. (Or sweetly? Hard to read those guys.) We reached the dry riverbed around noon.

For 15 minutes we traveled along its sun-bleached bank. Then our guide, Kyle MacIntyre, held up a hand.

"Notice anything?" he whispered. He gestured toward a lagoon ahead.

We scanned. No, nothing. Unless—

Two dark forms in the water. I began nudging my family backward.

"It's okay," MacIntyre said. "If we move very slowly, no sudden movements, we can get closer."

We crept through scrub, stopped when the forms came into focus: ears wriggling, skin like wet granite, inestimable blubber.

An ominous gurgle came. Suddenly 10 more heads surfaced, every bulging eye on us.

If you're a hippopotamus in southern Africa, there's a decent chance you've seen people on safari. But not people like us: For the next few days, mine would allegedly be the first family ever to explore these parts by bicycle. With our two teens—Casper and Cora—my wife Amy and I would travel from tented camp to tented camp, making our way from the dusty frontier town of Maun to the Makgadikgadi Pans, the vast, cracked remnant of an ancient lake that once covered 30,000 square miles. From

Clockwise from top left: Employee Sega Mosarwa at Natural Selection's Meno a Kwena tented camp; Botswana has more than 2,000 hippos; breakfast during a game drive at Camp Kalahari; stopping to get a closer look at animals while cycling; Mbamba camp opened in April 2025 in the northern Okavango Delta; Natural Selection guide Kyle MacIntyre readies bikes for the trails.

Pages 66–67: Northeastern Botswana's Makgadikgadi Pans are some of the largest salt flats in the world; roughly 20,000 bush elephants migrate to the Okavango Delta each year.

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TITAN RACING

Opposite page: The 10 tents that comprise Meno a Kwena safari camp sit above Botswana's Boteti River, a popular watering hole for elephants and zebras. The river is fed by the Okavango Delta, roughly 100 miles to the northwest.

there we'd catch a flight for the watery labyrinth of the Okavango Delta, where we'd trade bikes for open-air trucks and dugout canoes.

Now, protected only by cycling shorts and gall, staring down 40,000 cumulative pounds of one of Africa's deadliest species, I found myself scrutinizing the bike part of our plan.

Enough with the suspense: I am not writing this from inside a hippo. MacIntyre assessed the hulking animals' vibe and deemed them a nonthreat. Which freed us to watch them snort and jostle, and to marvel at the sheer convergence of our otherwise separate universes. I once saw the actor Willem Dafoe in New York City and it was like that—except better, because Willem Dafoe probably can't eat 88 pounds of grass a day or distinguish friends from rivals by smelling their dung.

If I sound like a wildlife novice, it's because I am. We are wander-around-cities people, my family and I. But these last couple years had flipped a switch in us. We needed a break from humanity—our idiotic politics, our unsustainable pace, our stupid algorithms.

Humbling ourselves before nature seemed right, and Botswana features the most humbling nature around: the largest herd of elephants on the continent, plus a full 40 percent of the land protected as national parks, game reserves, or wildlife management areas. Parentally, we thought it might be good to stop muttering about Where Things Are Heading and instead appreciate some of what exists presently.

HOURS AFTER THE HIPPO ENCOUNTER, we arrived at Meno a Kwena, an elegant camp in northern Botswana, perched above the snaking Boteti River. Immediately a staff member ushered us past the open-air kitchen and fire pit, down to the water—just as dozens of zebras and elephants were gathering for a drink. The zebras pranced, all frisky energy; the elephants, lumbering and mournful, trailed behind with their ancient thoughts.

My disorientation returned. These animals fill our books and screens and toy chests from infancy, and for that feel existentially familiar. But of course, they're also deeply *other*—the cultural imagination seizes on these creatures because they're rare. And now, here they were, defying something fundamental, exploding from concept into reality. The elephants were more solemn and inward-looking than we are typically shown, the zebras startlingly intricate and finely drawn. I vowed never to casually sketch either again.

At dinner, under blankets and a spatter of stars, we grilled our guide MacIntyre about his life in this world. Tall, affable, ready with a wink, he's the sort who can orate entertainingly about anything, because he probably did that thing at some point, likely with a machete in his teeth. The son of renowned guides, he grew up in a different era of Botswana and of safari itself. MacIntyre's emphasis now: conservation and respect.

Those aren't just nice ideas. Over the past three decades, Botswana has doubled down on sustainable tourism as an engine of growth, in an economy historically dominated by diamonds and beef. Noting the crowds at other safari destinations, the government carved out a high-cost, low-volume approach. Capacity at safari lodges is limited, as is access to parks and concessions; in return those lodges are luxurious, and the ecosystems around them pristine.

Against this backdrop, MacIntyre has hung his bicycle-shaped shingle. As a guide for the safari outfitter Natural Selection, he's spent the last few years exploring old elephant trails—paths that develop over time due to animal use—that could double as bike lanes. His routes needed to hit points of interest while also giving the animals a wide berth where appropriate. Traveling by bicycle requires a profoundly sensitive understanding of the wildlife all around, he contends: being attuned to the bush, rather than guns or radios, is what keeps us safe.

The result of his project is a look at another side of Botswana. Riders experience a landscape they'd merely glimpse—not feel—from a Land Cruiser: the warm scent of wild sage; an acacia full of buffalo weavers and pied babblers; warthog holes to peer right into. In wide-open areas, MacIntyre let Casper speed ahead. In bushier parts—lurkier parts—we formed a watchful phalanx behind our leader. We were forever late reaching our next destination, because we were busy earning PhDs in tracking. Predator prints not yet topped with insect prints were recent. Older male lions leave a deeper heel impression. The mopane branches littering our path? Discarded elephant snacks, the bush's version of Cheetos bags along a highway.

I'd been genuinely concerned that our happy biking scheme would end gruesomely. Maybe fear is our default lens on wildness—a leftover instinct that once kept us uneaten. And maybe in the West's long tradition of exoticizing Africa, we've come to exaggerate the risks of the continent. But actually being here, that stuff melts away. In their place, more interesting preoccupations materialize: the architecture of the food chain, the sheer logistics of a giraffe. Frankly we were too fascinated to be scared, even when I almost peed on a cobra hiding in a thorn bush.

THAT AFTERNOON WE arrived at Camp Kalahari, a serene outpost at the edge of the Makgadikgadi Pans, some 100 miles southeast of Maun, where we had begun our journey. Camp Kalahari delivers the classic safari aesthetic: vintage trunks, Persian rugs, canvas tents under acacia trees. We thumbed through worn books, sipped

tea, and then, a little before dusk, climbed into a Land Cruiser and rattled a few miles out to the salt pans.

There is nothing like nothingness. The earth stretched flat in every direction, almost to the horizon—a pale, cracked crust, vaguely lunar. No trees, no hills, not even a tuft of grass. A guide from the camp, Prince Tumisang Mugibelo, had joined us, and set a table with drinks. We raised our glasses to the silence, and the nearly setting sun. Then MacIntyre gave the order: Walk out onto the pans and lie down far from each other and experience solitude.

We fanned out, walking until we were all a couple hundred yards apart. That old bell trilled in my head: *Predator country! Kids are far away!* But I also trusted MacIntyre. The crust pressed into my spine, the enormous sky vaulting overhead. The silence pressed in. A minute passed, five minutes passed. My human thoughts dimmed, my animal senses sharpened. I became a vessel for wind and smell and sound. Then a deep, unmistakable roar of a lion rolled across the flatness. MacIntyre called us in.

We were getting ready to get back in the truck when Mugibelo cleared his throat. For the next 10 minutes, standing in the pale moonlight, he delivered one of those soliloquies you encounter only a few times in your life: a sweeping disquisition on his beloved country.

Many visitors, he began, go home thrilled by what they find here—the elephants, lions, and giraffes. “But those same things are in Zimbabwe, in South Africa. What makes Botswana unique?”

So he told us.

“We gained our full independence in 1966 from the British, and at that time we were the second-poorest nation in the world,” he said. The very next year, Botswana discovered diamonds; the country transformed. Life expectancy shot up, literacy shot up. The nation has been a democracy ever since. “And we have a bright future ahead of us,” he said.

From there he talked about racial harmony, and humane refugee policies, and solar power. As the moon rose, Mugibelo gestured out to the salt pans behind us.

This area was once the floor of a giant lake, he said, surrounded by forest. It was here that early humans lived, some researchers propose—until the rainfall and climate shifted and they began walking outward, becoming what we are now.

“So in a sense,” he said, “you’re back home. It’s been a long time, but you’re finally here.”

THE NEXT MORNING, MacIntyre led us to a different spot on the pans—bleached and still, seemingly lifeless, until we heard a stream of high-pitched squeaks. *Wurwurwur!*

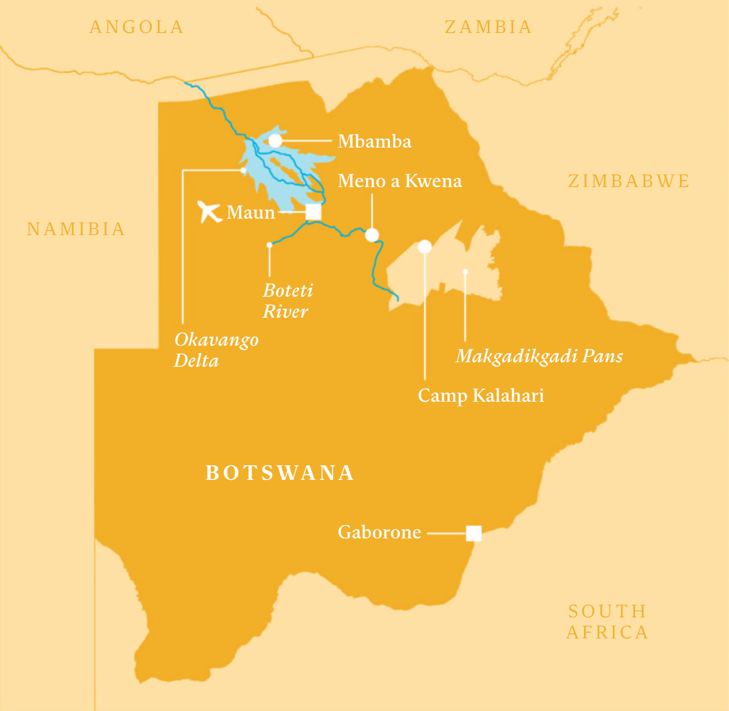
Looking closer, we found the source: a large colony of meerkats, that impossibly cute variety of mongoose who stand at butler-like attention, perpetually scanning

This page: Prince Tumisang Mugibelo has been guiding with Natural Selection since 2023.

Opposite page: Once 30,000 square miles, Lake Makgadikgadi dried up millennia ago and formed the salt pans.

TAKE THIS TRIP

Contributing writer Chris Colin’s eight-day Botswana itinerary was put together by Teresa Sullivan, cofounder of Mango African Safaris (*mangoafricansafaris.com*), who specializes in family travel. The trip featured a Natural Selection cycling safari into the Makgadikgadi Pans and exploring the Okavango Delta. *From $2,444 per person, per day.*



THERE IS NOTHING LIKE NOTHINGNESS. THE EARTH STRETCHED FLAT IN EVERY DIRECTION, ALMOST TO THE HORIZON—A PALE, CRACKED CRUST, VAGUELY LUNAR.

for predators. A dozen babies were begging their parents for breakfast.

"Lie down near them," MacIntyre said. We did, and one by one, the meerkats began inching closer—and then scampering right up our bodies for a better vista. At first I feared they'd been tamed. In fact, they'd merely been habituated, the way a bird learns to ignore a rhino. We weren't food or threat, just a handy step stool.

That afternoon, Mugibelo told me that the meerkats aren't just adorable. They are proof that safaris can evolve: The cuteness of these creatures draws travelers to Natural Selection camps; the revenue helps relocate cattle farms; fewer cattle means fewer lions are shot; lion numbers in this area have risen. It was part of a larger story—the rebound of elephant numbers, a renewed war on poachers. Done right, tourism becomes not just an observer of ecosystems but part of their repair.

More evidence of this is found in the village of Seronga, in northwest Botswana. For years, children here had to walk through elephant corridors en route to school, sometimes with tragic results. (This, in turn, lowered sympathy for the animals among locals.) In 2020, Natural Selection helped sponsor a bus service to provide safe transport for the kids and anyone else needing it. One morning, we saw the so-called Elephant Express pick up more than a dozen people along a dirt road. It was a solution not of conquest but coexistence—a glimpse of what humans can do when we decide not to be the problem.

WARTHOGS ON THE RUNWAY! On day five of our expedition, we watched a small plane abort its landing at an airstrip, circle around, and then slow to stop and pick us up after the animals had moved away. Up we bounced into the sky, where for the next half hour we observed parched brown give way to electric green, and noted a density of megafauna that would make cycling impossible. Even from the plane the Okavango Delta was astonishing.

The Okavango is not your classic delta. Every year a pulse of water sloshes into northern Botswana from Angola, fanning across more than 6,000 square miles but never leading to an ocean—it pours into the country and stops, creating a dreamlike inland floodplain all its own: channels, wild grasses, hippo trails carving their way to islands that began with a termite mound, which summoned hungry elephants, whose dung contained seeds for trees.

We touched down in a clearing, where a guide named Ali Ntwayagae was waiting to drive us a couple hours to Mbamba, a plush tented camp in a private concession that opened in April 2025. We were heading west, or maybe east, possibly south, when Ntwayagae's eyes shot to a cluster of small trees. He pulled over and we saw it: a sleek leopard, slinking through brush for an unsuspecting spur fowl.

This page, from top: A sundowner at Camp Kalahari; when the Okavango Delta floods, it can triple in size.

Opposite page: Known as "mobs," meerkat groups can include up to 30 members.

OVER THE NEXT THREE DAYS, WE HAD STAGGERING ENCOUNTERS WITH THE FULL SAFARI CANON.

This page, from top: In addition to its pool, Mbamba has a small library; day-lilies are one of two water lily species in the Okavango Delta.

Opposite page: A *mokoro* canoe is carved from a large tree trunk and used to navigate waterways.

Pages 76–77: Ostriches, native to Africa, can be up to nine feet tall.

The cat moved in utter silence, sometimes freezing for minutes at a time. We froze too. She was up against not just her quarry, but time itself. Any minute the bush squirrels above would sound the alarm. She took another step, ears flat. Nobody breathed. Then it came: a warning call from a branch above. The jig was up. She'd likely been hunting for hours. She sprawled on her side and closed her eyes.

We missed the bikes—we'd been spoiled by that unmediated immersion in the bush. But over the next three days, we had staggering encounters with the full safari canon. Zebras, ostriches, baboons, impalas, elephants, crocodiles, elephants whose tails had been eaten by crocodiles. On one of our drives, Ntwayagae pointed out a patch of earth containing nothing but two giraffes' hooves.

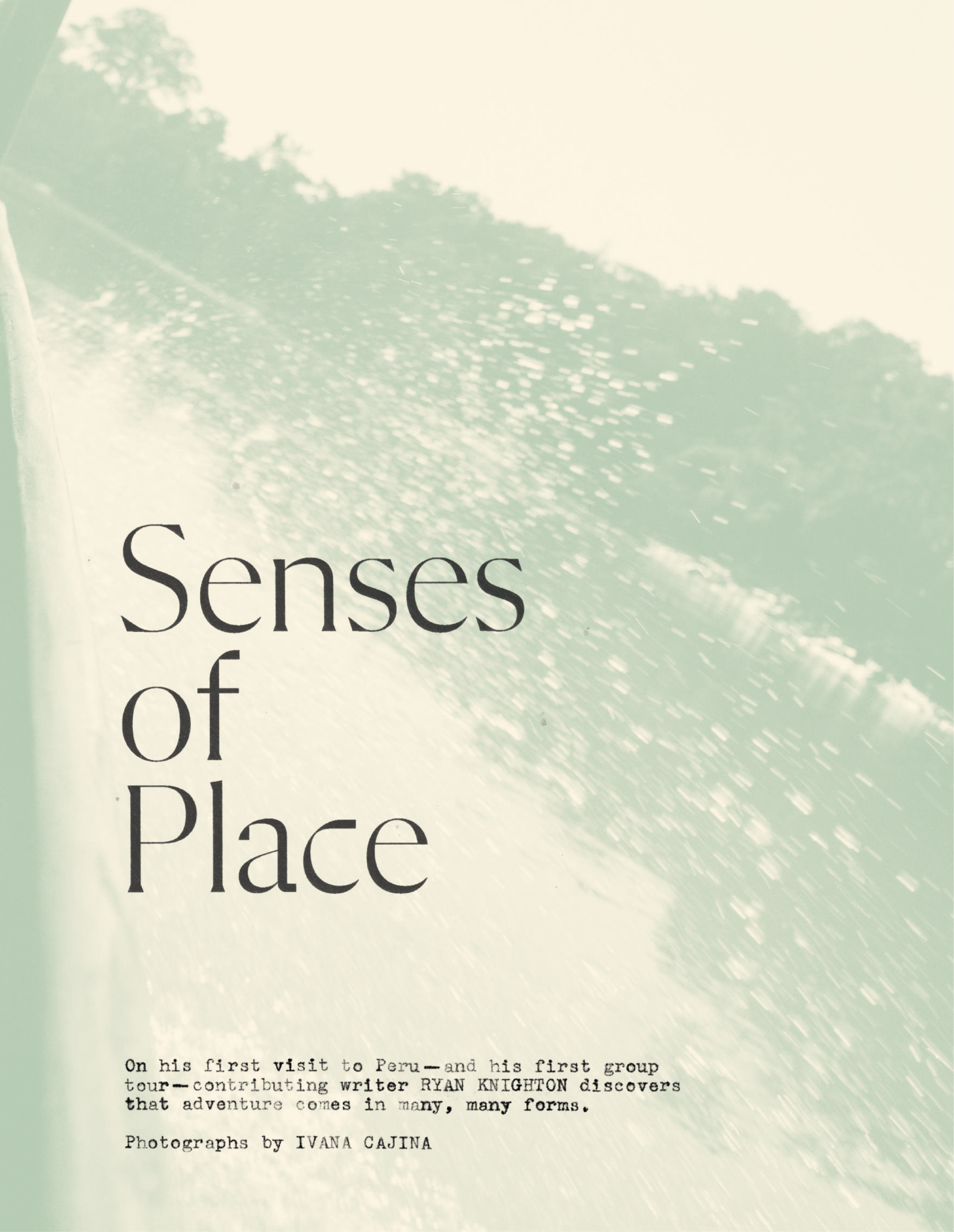
"If you want to commit a murder, do it here," he said. "The hyenas eat all the bones, just leave hooves."

Another morning, Ntwayagae hurried us into the Land Cruiser and drove east from camp about 10 minutes. He didn't want to get our hopes up, but . . . he trailed off, cut the engine. There, in a patch of sun, lay half a dozen African wild dogs, piled atop one another like puppies. The continent's most endangered predators might also be the most beautiful, their coats a mottled patchwork of gold and black. For 15 minutes we watched in silence, wondering if we'd witness a hunt. Where lions kill quickly, wild dogs devour their prey alive, one bite at a time. Even the most hardened bush guides I met winced when describing the end of an impala or a kudu or a springbok. We were thankful, in a way, not to witness it.

Our final day, driving to the airstrip, Ntwayagae pulled over one last time. He gestured to a patch of dry grass. In it lay a massive white tusk. The elephant, he guessed, had died months earlier. He turned off the car and we climbed out. One by one, we took turns lifting the object. It was far heavier than it looked, like lead, and we were absorbing the burden elephants bear when my wife Amy went to hoist the tusk. She was briefly triumphant, and then it slipped. We all heard the crunch and saw the blood on the ivory. It had landed on her nose.

For the rest of the ride, she laughed through tissues. All that worrying about being mauled by a lion, perforated by a hippo—and it was a dead elephant that got her. We bumped along toward the clearing in the trees and our journey back to the domain of humans and their absurdities. At home in California, life's clamor soon resumed: work, errands, headlines. But something seems to have stayed with us; a rearranged sense of scale, or maybe our place in it. I like knowing that the wild dogs aren't thinking at all about us, just their next meal. Ⓐ

Contributing writer Chris Colin went fishing in Oregon for Afar's Summer 2025 issue. Michelle Heimerman is Afar's director of photography.



Senses of Place

On his first visit to Peru—and his first group tour—contributing writer RYAN KNIGHTON discovers that adventure comes in many, many forms.

Photographs by IVANA CAJINA

This page and pages 80–81: The Amazon is home to roughly 10 percent of the world's known species, making it the most biodiverse place on the planet. *Opposite page, from top:* Miraflores, with its waterfront access, is one of the wealthiest districts in Lima; Intrepid Travel has been offering group trips since 1989.

A

AS SHE STEPPED OUT of our hotel in Lima, my wife, Tracy, took in the view. I'm blind, so I did not. Some sensations reminded me of our home on Vancouver Island, though. Sea lions barked. The fog from the Pacific Ocean filled my nose with a briny air. As Tracy and I followed the city's *malecón*, or boardwalk, gentle waves peeled like a sigh, suggesting the presence of surfers. At *cevichería* Canta Rana, I scarfed a bowl of *chupe*, a Peruvian soup made here with sea bass, tomato, sweet potato, and the occasional maize kernel the size of a kidney bean. We washed it all down with tall glasses of *chicha morada*, Peru's ubiquitous purple corn juice. Not the view, but these first sounds, smells, and tastes landed me in South America. And I was ready for more.

Peru was a destination that I had never really considered exploring as a blind person. *What would be the point in merely listening to people look at legendary mountain views and Incan ruins?* But over time, I began to realize this was a ridiculously narrow way of imagining my time in an entire country, let alone one as geographically varied as Peru. So last summer, when I heard about a nine-day itinerary with the tour operator Intrepid Travel—one that takes participants inland to the wilds of the Amazon basin and up to the heights of the Andes—I was intrigued. Surely there would be plenty to feed my other senses.

But now that we were there on the ground in Lima, I was feeling trepidatious. While Tracy and I have traveled the world together—to find enlightenment in Bhutan, on safari in Zimbabwe—this would be our first time participating in a group tour. Eleven of us were to make our way through Peru like a curious platoon. I was used to traveling at my own pace, and I feared my blindness would slow everybody down. Would I distract our guide's focus or, worse, ruin someone's moment as I fell off Machu Picchu? Time would tell.

After lunch, Tracy and I walked back to the hotel to meet Paola Ramos, our Peruvian guide, and our new tour mates in the lobby. As we sat down, I could feel the group's surprise watching me fumble about for a chair. Things got even quieter as some people tried to square the circle of a blind man joining their sightseeing adventure. No malice. Just honest befuddlement.

Soon we went around the circle and made our introductions. Among us were several couples from Australia and New Zealand. Men named Richard were aplenty; there was also a Rick. Next to me sat Anne, a lone Irish retiree on her first South American tour. I adored her accent. When she asked Paola about the Incan capital of Cuzco, she pronounced it like Costco, conjuring for me the image of massive detergent boxes and family-size Doritos bags decaying among the ruins. To my writerly cheer, there was even a young editor from Sydney. Introducing myself, I said I was from a small fishing village in Canada and that I seemed to be very lost. A few people laughed. A few seemed uncertain if they should.

TOP RIGHT: BERND JONKMANNS/LAIF/REDUX

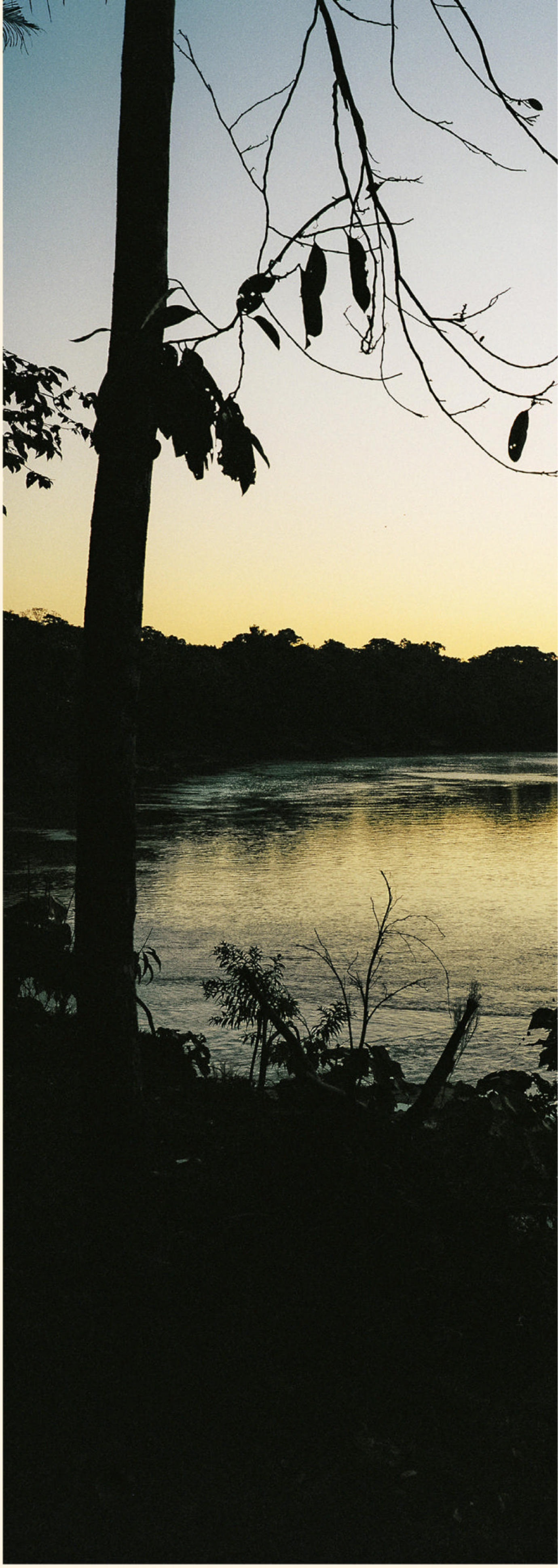
THE NEXT MORNING, we flew to the city of Puerto Maldonado in southeastern Peru, our gateway to the Amazon. From the airport, we took a car to the water, and helpful hands passed me down a gangway and onto a tippy boat that would take our group up a river called the Madre de Dios, or Mother of God. Such a name seemed fitting as the choppy waters sprayed us like a river baptism. Motoring past caimans and macaws, we snaked deeper into the jungle until our guides to the Amazon, Yuriel and Freddy, ushered us up a trail to the main lodge at the Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción, an ecological reserve that would serve as our home for the next two nights.

We didn't have long to rest. An hour after landing, I put on bug spray, boots, and long sleeves and set out for our first trek into the Amazon. After Lima's overwhelming traffic and crowds, the natural silence was resounding. Things scurried in the bush, whatever they were. Things also scurried in the branches above. We were the only things, perhaps, not scurrying. Carefully, step by step, I listened and trained my eyes down at the ground as if my unseeing gaze could keep me from playing footsie with an unsuspecting viper.

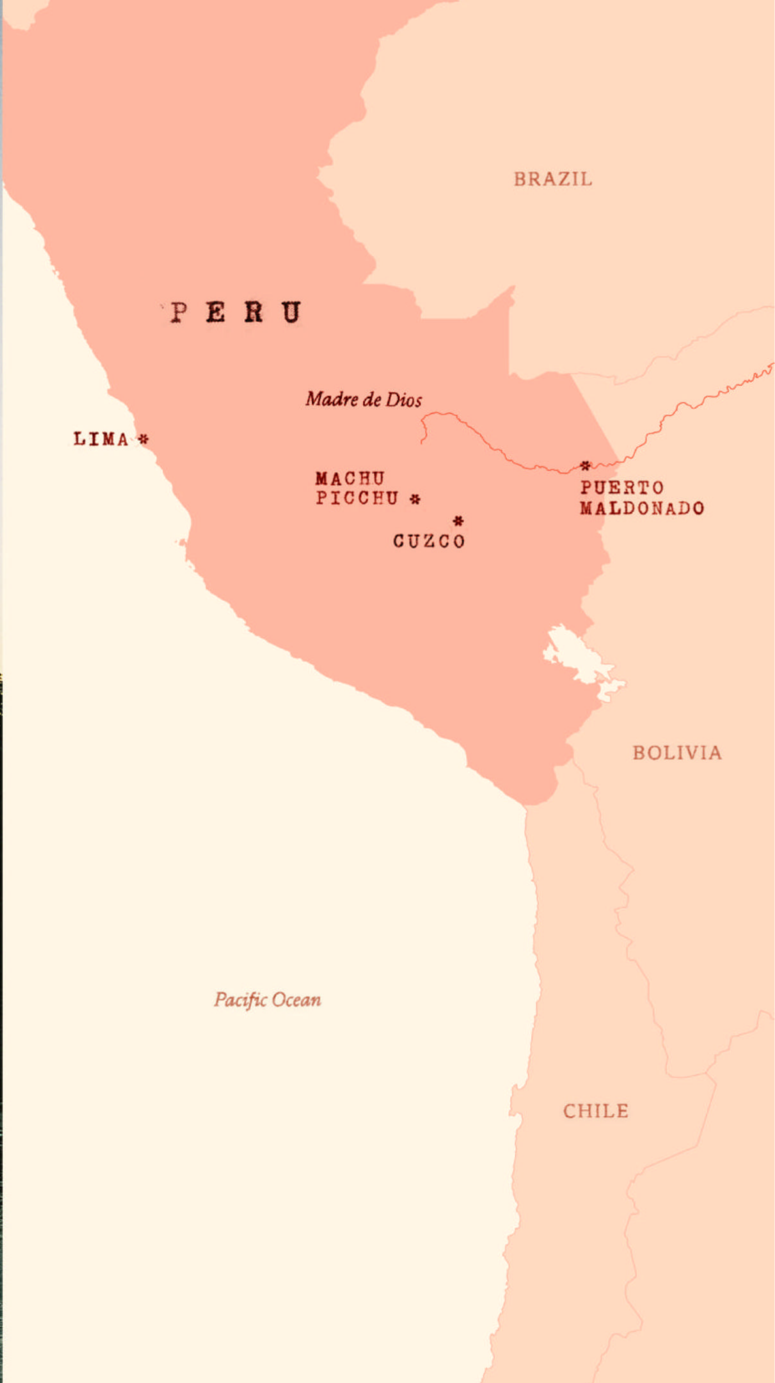
As we hiked deeper into the rainforest, Yuriel identified the towering ficus and walking palms whose roots seek patches of sunlight, walking their trunks slowly, slowly through the jungle. He also had us feeling and tasting our way through the terrain. At one point he placed my hand on a cluster of vines wrapped around a rubber tree. Sticky sap stretched between my fingers like an elastic band. I plucked a few of the vine's leaves. They felt heart-shaped. Yuriel explained that Indigenous peoples would pick these leaves for a beloved. If the person dreamed of you that night, romance was fated by the intelligence of the jungle. Love, it seems, does grow on trees.

One of the Richards and I were growing hungry, so we snacked on the seeds of cottony spore balls scattered about the forest floor. Though dropped by various trees, they tasted like peanuts. For dessert, Yuriel assured me that a protein-rich termite that he placed in my hand would be enjoyably minty. Despite his encouragement, I couldn't bring myself to pop it into my mouth. Others debated an attempt, but nobody would brave a taste.

Back at the reserve a few hours later, I looked forward to a good night's sleep. But it never came. With our cabana windows open to the midnight air, the jungle erupted in my ears. Choirs of insects clicked and hummed. Others buzzed and pulsed. Try as I might, I couldn't count the number of distinct patterns and tones, which I suppose was my failed version of counting sheep. Imagine all those species competing to communicate across the jungle against every other sound. Each creature had to evolve a specific frequency to occupy its small niche in the airwaves of the forest. Radio gold for a blind guy. I was up all night in wonder. Then, like an alarm clock, howler monkeys unleashed their banshee shriek, staking their territory as the sun rose.



From left: The Amazon rainforest has four layers—forest, understory, tributary of the Amazon River that eventually flows into Bolivia; dry


BRAZIL
PERU
Madre de Dios
LIMA
MACHU PICCHU
CUZCO
PUERTO MALDONADO
BOLIVIA
Pacific Ocean
CHILE
ARGENTINA

canopy, and emergent—each with different levels of light and density; the Madre de Dios is a significant season in the Amazon (June to November) brings the most sunlight and forest growth.

OVER A BREAKFAST of passion fruit, cacao bread, and eggs, my fellow travelers and I bonded over our lack of sleep; I had never heard so many sighted people regale each other with tales of mysterious noises that went bump in the night. Some of us had at first mistaken the howler monkeys for machinery. *Anybody else hear an industrial vacuum around dawn? Or was somebody torching tar shingles on a roof somewhere?* Janet and Rick, hoteliers from Melbourne, said they heard animals padding around their cabin during the night. Or maybe Andrew and his wife said that. I couldn't identify some voices yet. Breakfast was its own cacophony in my ears.

The plan for the morning was to paddle an oxbow lake and see what we could see. To get there we hiked past hundreds of butterflies sunning by the river, or so I was told, and followed a muddy trail inland to a small boat launch. The occasional macaw made its presence heard overhead. We cruised our dugouts around Lake Sandoval, where my tour mates spotted rare giant river otters and cormorants, their wings like wet capes thrown open to the sun. But most exciting was any sudden splash, or a strange, distant cry, or a mysterious rustling in the thick shore brush. *What was that? Where did it go?* Such noises pulled at people's curiosity harder than the world in front of their eyes. It makes sense. The density of a jungle teaches you to listen first and foremost, because so much of it, and what it conceals, cannot be seen.

It seemed like all the animals of the canopy held their breath.

While it offers myriad excursions in the Amazon basin, Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción is perhaps best known for its canopy tour. A series of seven rope bridges, suspended a hundred feet up in the treetops, provides biologists with direct access to the ecosystem overhead; for years, it has given visitors a rare glimpse into the habitat of the Amazon's endangered three-toed sloth and screaming piha birds. But to walk these bridges, to feel them swing and bend step by step, requires fortitude.

I joked with Rick that maybe it would be easier if you couldn't see how far down you might fall. But I really didn't think so. Tracy, who has enough vertigo to power a small city, tapped out as she squinted up at the rope walkways. Each could carry only one person at a time, blind or not. Rick decided he would go first. Although his fear of heights had already drenched him in sweat, he reasoned that if I was going to try to feel my way alone and without my white cane, he'd step out of his comfort zone as well. We would lift each other up, as it were.

Being the first to go up, Rick was also the first to come down. Pale and shaken, he rushed to Tracy and warned her that I probably shouldn't be up there. It was too late.

"Don't grab the ropes like a railing," Paola coached me as I stepped on the first bridge. "They will bend and make it unstable. Just lightly, lightly, touch them for guidance."

I left her behind and stepped fully on the first bridge. It immediately began to bounce and swing like a hammock. Yuriel's voice at the other end offered direction like a foghorn and assured me everything was safe. The ropes under my hands, touched lightly, lightly, felt somewhat frayed and old, and the ironwood slats under my feet seemed occasional. Some had gone missing from the weather and natural decay. Still, I shimmied and swayed across the bridge, terrified. It seemed like all the animals of the canopy held their breath. When something suddenly flew past, and far too close, I ducked and jostled the bridge so hard I thought it would never recover. But a few more steps and Yuriel's hand grabbed mine. I'd somehow made it. Only six more bridges to go.

After I did descend, and not from falling, I found everybody buzzing. I still couldn't quite believe I'd done it. *When was the last time I'd walked anywhere by myself and without a white cane, let alone through treetops?* Even the sighted folks had found it disorienting to hike through a soundscape that should be overhead. Rick and I agreed it was time for a drink to truly help us down.

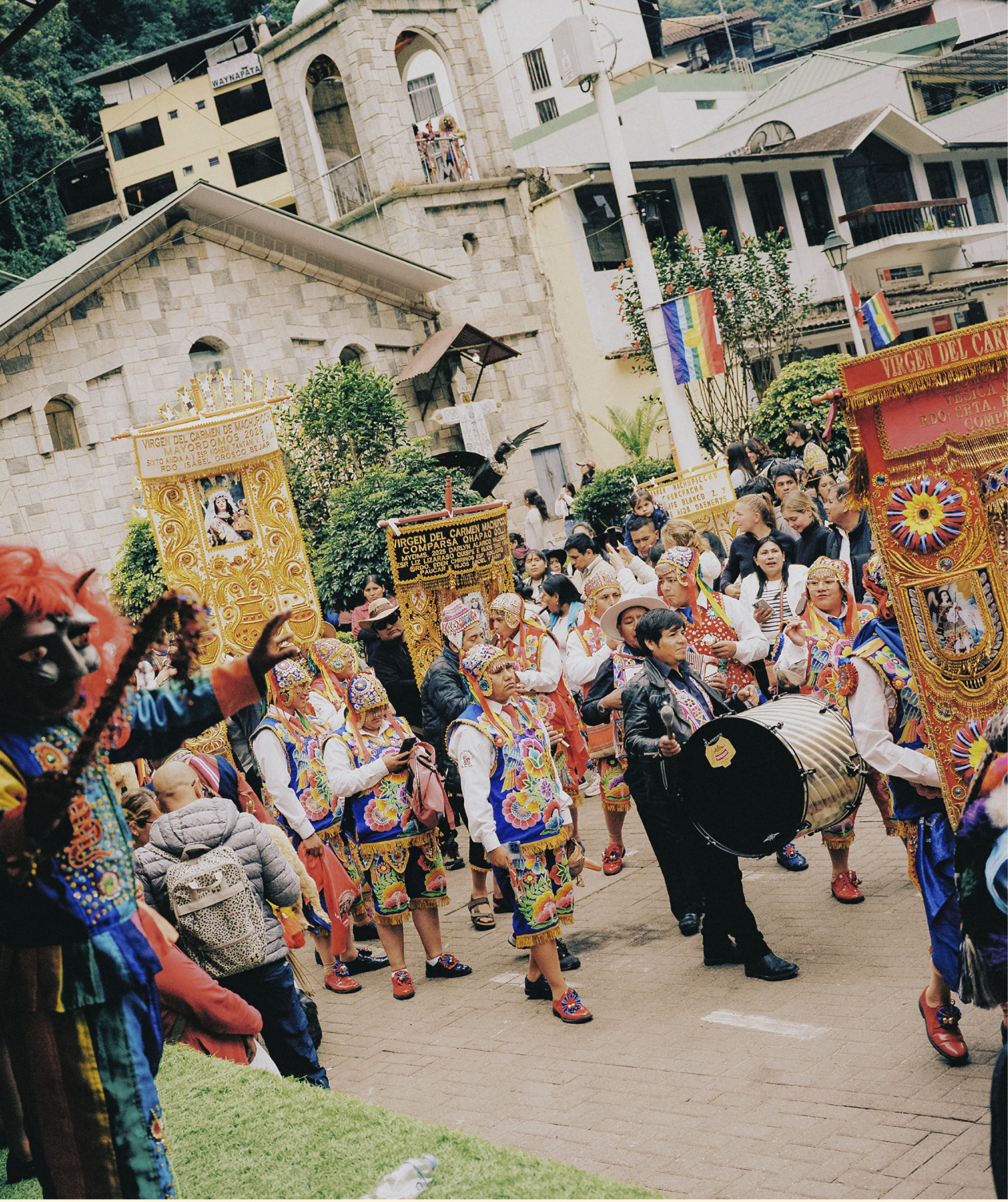
Once back at the lodge we gorged on fried plantains and drank our fill of pisco sours, a cocktail made with a grape spirit, bitters, lime juice, and egg white. I ordered *juane de gallina*, a traditional dish of chicken, rice, eggs, and olives steamed together in a bijao leaf, which tasted herby and bright. Others dined on a fried rice dish influenced by the marriage of Chinese and Peruvian cuisines, or *chifa*. Such fusion dishes reflect the country's large Chinese population, a migration that began in the 19th century, when Chinese workers came to Peru to build the railroads. As our group sampled each other's dishes and talked, I learned that Andrew, a New Zealander, once had a job tuning pianos in Canada and was as interested in sound as I am. We discovered that Rick's wife, Janet, had grown up near my hometown. Night fell and the insects began their choir. We laughed and ate and told stories of home as if home were the real faraway land.

This page: The average canopy height in the Amazon is 72 feet, with some treetops exceeding 100 feet.
Opposite page: Set on a 439-acre private ecological reserve, Inkaterra Hacienda Concepción has 25 cabins and five rooms in its main lodge.

TAKE THIS TRIP

Contributing writer Ryan Knighton joined Intrepid Travel on its nine-day “Premium Peru” trip, which visits Lima, the Amazon, Cuzco, and Machu Picchu. On the ground, meals, transport, accommodation, and luggage and airport transfers are included. Travel dates for 2025, 2026, and 2027 are available at *intrepidtravel.com*. *From $4,600 per person.*

Ceviche
Cuy Chactado
Café Org
MAS



This page: In the town of Aguas Calientes, residents celebrate the Virgen del Carmen, who is considered a protector against natural disasters. *Opposite page, from top:* The Sacred Valley is known as Willka Qhichwa in the Indigenous Quechua language; the Amazon rainforest stores an estimated 150 to 200 billion tons of carbon in its approximately 390 billion trees.

This page: Some of the stones at Machu Picchu weigh up to 50 tons, and are so perfectly fit that it is impossible to slide a piece of paper between them.
Opposite page: Machu Picchu was built around the mid-1400s and abandoned a century later. In 1911, American archaeologist Hiram Bingham helped popularize the site after locating it with the assistance of Indigenous farmers.

A

GUIAS
PROFESIONALES
www.agoturcusco.org.pe

A COUPLE DAYS later, it was time to begin our trek to Machu Picchu. We set off by bus from Cuzco, with its narrow Incan and Spanish streets and brutally thin air, to the town and archaeological site of Ollantaytambo. From there you can either begin a four-day hike through the Sacred Valley, up and down the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu, or you can elect to take the train to the little town of Aguas Calientes, at the foot of the mountain. We boarded our train in a rush, threading through a thick and raucous crowd of tourists. To find our assigned car in the chaos, we had to listen for its letter to be sung by a railroad worker who then danced us, as if in a conga line, to the right spot on the track. *We should find more occasions to guide each other by song*, I thought. It works.

Given the heights and drops awaiting us in Machu Picchu—all those mountain vistas, narrow passages, and stone stairways—I had to wonder if anything up there would be worthy of a blind man's risk. Tracy wasn't feeling well, ragged with a cold, so Paola and the others would have to guide me one step at a time, slowly, carefully. A few days earlier, one of the many buses taking visitors up the mountain from Aguas Calientes had driven off the road and over the ledge, plummeting its occupants down to the next switchback. There, people held the bus with their hands to keep it from sliding down to the next tier. I couldn't see any of the road as our bus climbed the mountain, but the riders grew notably quieter with every turn. Occasionally a voice would gasp at the window. Even Paola, seated beside me, admitted she struggled with the view every time. Then she went quiet until we reached the top and got off the bus.

One of the marvels of Incan design is its masonry, encountered frequently in Cuzco and all through Machu Picchu. The most astonishing thing about the stone walls, archways, and passages is the miracle of Incan engineering. No mortar affixes the massive pink granite blocks to one another. Without using calculators, modern tools, or even written numbers, the Incans somehow managed to arrange their towering walls at a constant 13-degree angle. The perfectly jigsawed blocks, stable under their own weight and precision, were hewn using little more than chunks of hematite, an iron-rich stone found miles away. The seams between bricks of any wall, some of the blocks weighing tons, feel as smooth to the touch as a faint scar. I followed one with my finger, unable to find any imperfections.

Things can sometimes be revealed by not looking at them as intended.

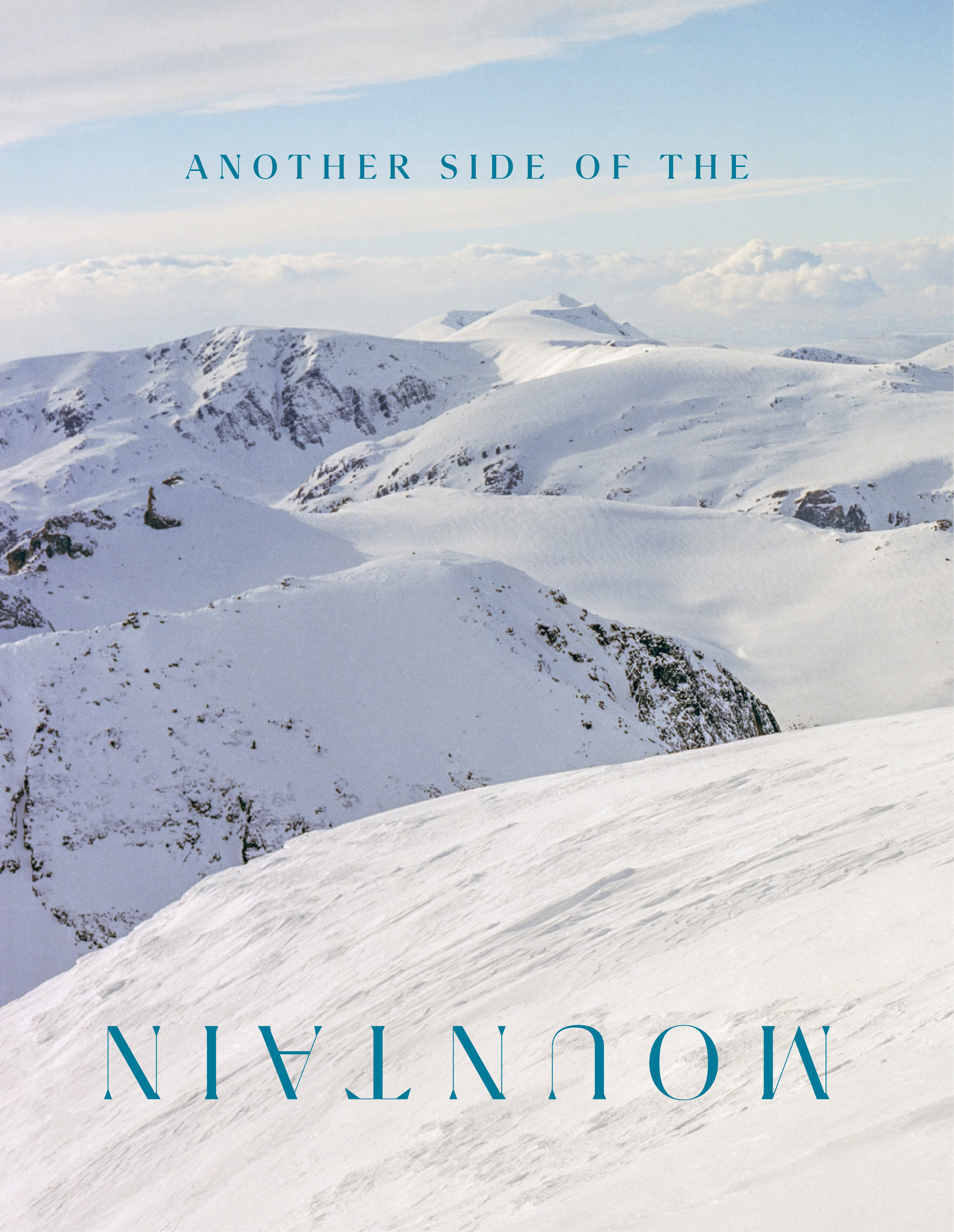
Meanwhile, Paola vigilantly guided my feet, one here, another there, no, *there*, before I might hear with alarm, "N-n-n-nooo!" Everybody helped. Andrew and Richard from New Zealand. Mary from Ireland. They took turns guiding me and describing whatever they could around me, from the sunlit colors of the mountains across the valley, to the drama of exhausted families squabbling. It took more than three hours, but I made it safely through the ruins of the citadel and into a room on the eastern side. There Paola steered my hand around two shallow reflecting pools. These stone bowls were believed to have been used by Incan scholars for astronomical observations. As a blind guy, I can appreciate two things demonstrated by these celestial mirrors. First, yes, these scholars knew how to protect their eyes from the sun. But they also understood that things can sometimes be revealed by not looking at them as intended.

As we neared the end of our time at Machu Picchu, I could hear the Instagrammers around us fluffing their hair and fixing their makeup, readying to snap themselves against a last iconic view. A distant part of me felt jealous. How strange, even after 30 years of blindness, to always leave places and people without one photograph. But there are the moments. The minute I made it down the last few stairs to our exit, the long and patient line of travelers behind us erupted in applause. My efforts to keep up had not gone unnoticed.

That evening in Aguas Calientes, Tracy rejoined our group as we gathered for a last meal. A band on the restaurant's little stage played Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence." Then they played it again. As we shared a plate of fried guinea pig, I felt a swell of affection for Richard and Rick and Paola and Anne and Janet and Andrew and all the others. Perhaps I had been unjustifiably nervous back in Lima a few days ago. Without seeing any of Peru, I had walked on mountains and through ancient cities, amid jungle treetops and among architectural ruins. There were so many sensations with me now, like burrs stuck to the hide of a passing animal. And it was mostly thanks to these people, who started off as strangers and ended up as something like friends.

Contributing writer Ryan Knighton surfed in Hawai'i for Afar's Spring 2025 issue. Photographer Ivana Cajina is based in Brooklyn, New York and Tampa, Florida.

ANOTHER SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN



In the Balkans, photographer
KARI MEDIG
captures the beauty of a
unique ski culture.

by
NAOMI TOMKY

“I’m drawn to quieter places where skiing is still fun,” Medig says of his trips to the ski resorts of Bjelašnica and Jahorina (pictured) in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Pages 92–93: Bulgaria’s mountain ranges include the Rila, Pirin, and Balkan stretches.

P **PHOTOGRAPHER KARI MEDIG** grew up skiing in Fernie, southeastern British Columbia, and has spent the past 15 years traveling to ski and document the sport, from the iconic Hahnenkamm downhill in Austria to slopes in landlocked Lesotho. But there's one place in particular that has captivated him: the Balkans, where the eponymous mountains extend 330 miles through Bulgaria and the lesser-known Dinaric Alps run south through Bosnia and Herzegovina toward the Sharr Mountains of Kosovo. More than 30 peaks are higher than 8,200 feet (the average height of the Swiss Alps), but the regional ski culture remains laid-back—Medig once found a woman running a ski rental business out of an old Yugo hatchback.

Medig first visited Bulgaria in the winter of 2004. In the decades since, he returned for another lap through the country, carved turns through Kosovo in 2014, and ventured to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2023. "There's good skiing to be had," he says of the slopes at low-key resorts he went to, all within an hour or two by car from each country's capital.

"It is skiing that is less concerned with modern amenities and simply exists for the pure joy of gliding on snow," Medig says. Which isn't to say amenities don't exist; many of the ski areas he's visited have updated their original Yugoslav-era chairlifts. But it's the base villages dotted with Ottoman-style architecture and the pale pink of a nearby Orthodox church that distinguish the ski towns and resorts like Brezovica and Jahorina.

"I find skiing is just a great way to get to know a culture," Medig says. "You're sharing the same joy that locals are, in their own home place, so that just opens up a whole world of adventures."

SKI RENT
MIMA
SKI
ROSSIGNOL
FISCHER
HEAD
HEAD
ELAN
SALOMON
STÖCKLI
CROSS CR

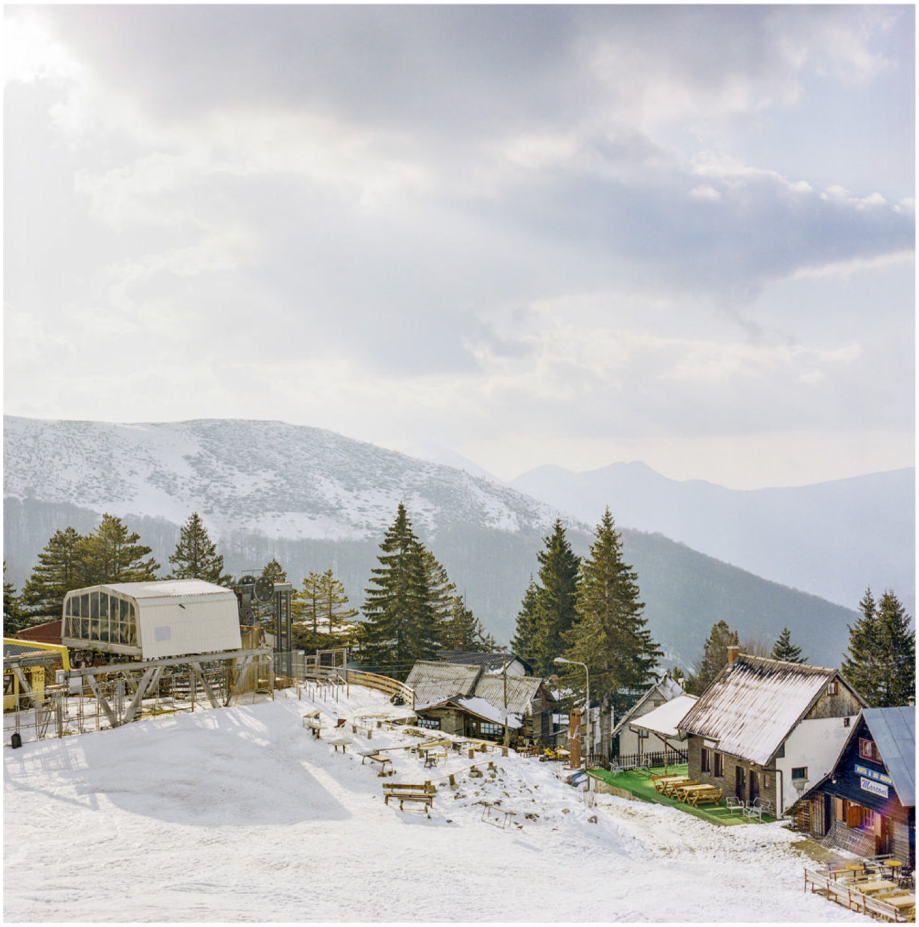
Bjelašnica mountain, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is 15 miles southwest of Sarajevo, the country's capital.

Medig traveled to Borovets, Bulgaria, in 2014. "Mountain landscapes are caught in geological time. We're just infrastructure," he says. "The actual surface that you ski on is going to stay the same; it doesn't matter what kind of lift gets you up there. And I think the people and the culture stay the same, too, to some degree."

Medig arrived in Kosovo in 2014, just six years after it had declared independence from Serbia. For residents of Kosovo, it was difficult to acquire passports and visas to leave the country, so anyone who wanted to ski needed to do so within the small nation, at slopes like Brezovica (pictured).

At 8,953 feet high, Malyovitsa is one of the tallest peaks in Bulgaria, and a point of national pride. Located in the southwestern part of the country, it is close to the Seven Rila Lakes, a picturesque group of glacial bodies of water.

Brezovica was developed by the Yugoslav government as a backup host for Olympic events, in case Sarajevo had a low snow year when hosting the 1984 Winter Games. Chairlifts carry skiers to 8,200 feet above sea level, granting them access to sprawling steep slopes in the southern Kosovo resort, less than two miles from the border with North Macedonia.



In addition to being known as a popular ski destination, Bulgaria's Malyovitsa is a center for rock climbing and mountaineering.

HOW TO SKI THE
BALKANS

The Balkan Peninsula is large, so it's best to concentrate on one country at a time. Most of the resorts Medig visited are close enough to big cities to grab rental skis for a day trip, though they all have the hotels, restaurants, and facilities for longer stays. Just make sure to get the timing right: Winters are short in the Balkans, with ski seasons running from late December to early March. Members of Afar's Travel Advisory Council can also assist with planning a trip to the region: *afar.com/about/travel-advisory-council.*

•

The town and ski area of Brezovica is 90 minutes from the airports in both Pristina (Kosovo) and Skopje (North Macedonia). Nonprofit tour agency **Ryce Travel** specializes in organizing ski trips, including weeklong adventures in Kosovo and Serbia, using local partners and guides.

•

In Bulgaria's Pirin Mountains, the **Kempinski Hotel Grand Arena Bansko** sits just across from the gondola that whisks skiers from town to the main base of the ski area. Guests can purchase the VIP Ski Pass, allowing them to skip the lines for the gondola and get fast access to the slopes.

•

For traditional lodging, bed down at **Mountain House Rajska Vrata** in Jahorina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, where ski days end on the sunny patio with local specialties such as nettle soup or herbal rakija (brandy) around the fireplace.

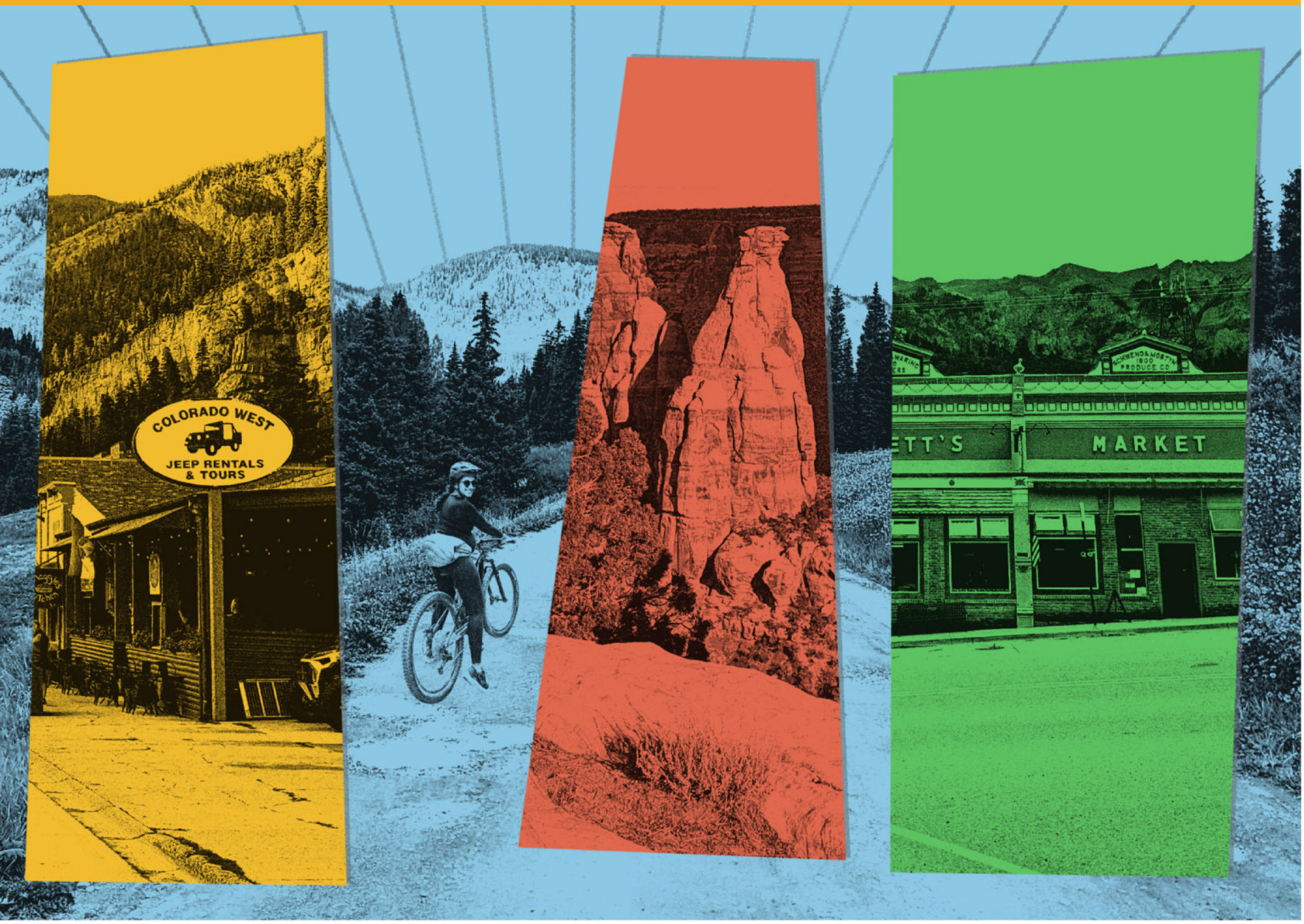
•

Tour operator **Exeter International** will help create highly tailored itineraries across the Balkans, combining skiing with historical and cultural exploration. Contact travel manager Arina Sazhina via the website: *exeterinternational.com.* Ⓐ

Jahorina, host of the women's alpine events at the 1984 Winter Olympics, is now the largest resort in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with 18 lifts and 32 miles of slopes. Located 40 minutes outside Sarajevo, Jahorina once served as a military base for Bosnian Serb forces during their siege of the city beginning in the early 1990s.

ROSSIGNOL
Ски Сервиз ! · вакса

Ski days in the Balkans end with the smell of cigarettes and *ćevapi*—Bosnian minced sausage—cooking on slopeside grills.



A Pregnant Pause in Colorado

by Sarika Bansal

FOR ANYONE WHO NEEDS to hear it, I will sing the gospel of the babymoon. Toward the end of the summer, nearing my third trimester of pregnancy, my husband and I drove across Colorado for five days, just the two of us. It was the perfect respite, a moment to pause and reflect before the tumult of a newborn.

Our first stop was the Colorado National Monument, which is often referred to as a miniature Grand Canyon. Thirty minutes outside the city of Grand Junction, we turned onto a twisty mountain road, mouths agape as we took in the red-rock landscape before us. We stretched our legs on the Canyon Rim Trail and read signs dotting the roadside that detailed the region's 11,000 years of human history.

Back in Grand Junction, western Colorado's largest city, we enjoyed an early dinner at Tacoparty, complete with sweet corn–flavored soft serve, and then headed about 100 miles south to Ouray (population 934), a Victorian-era mining town whose alpine environment and architecture have earned it the nickname "the Switzerland of America." We checked into the Western, a boutique hotel housed in a restored 1891 building. It served as an excellent base to explore the Ouray Perimeter Trail, a 6.5-mile loop around the charming downtown, and, more excitingly to me, the natural hot springs.

After a day of hiking and soaking, we drove an hour to our last destination, Telluride. Best known for its skiing and eponymous film festival, the town is relatively quiet in early August. We e-biked along the crowd-free Galloping Goose Trail, which partially follows a historic rail line and winds past turquoise lakes, high-altitude peaks, and brilliant yarrow and fireweed wildflowers.

Our babymoon came to a close back downtown, where we poked our heads into the 112-year-old Sheridan Opera House, as well as a custom hat store and adorable toy shop. That evening, we visited the Grand, an elegant New American restaurant; my husband ordered a mezcal old-fashioned while I sipped a mocktail. We toasted and talked about how one day, we'd recount this trip to our newest family member. Ⓐ

Art by CHANTAL JAHCHAN

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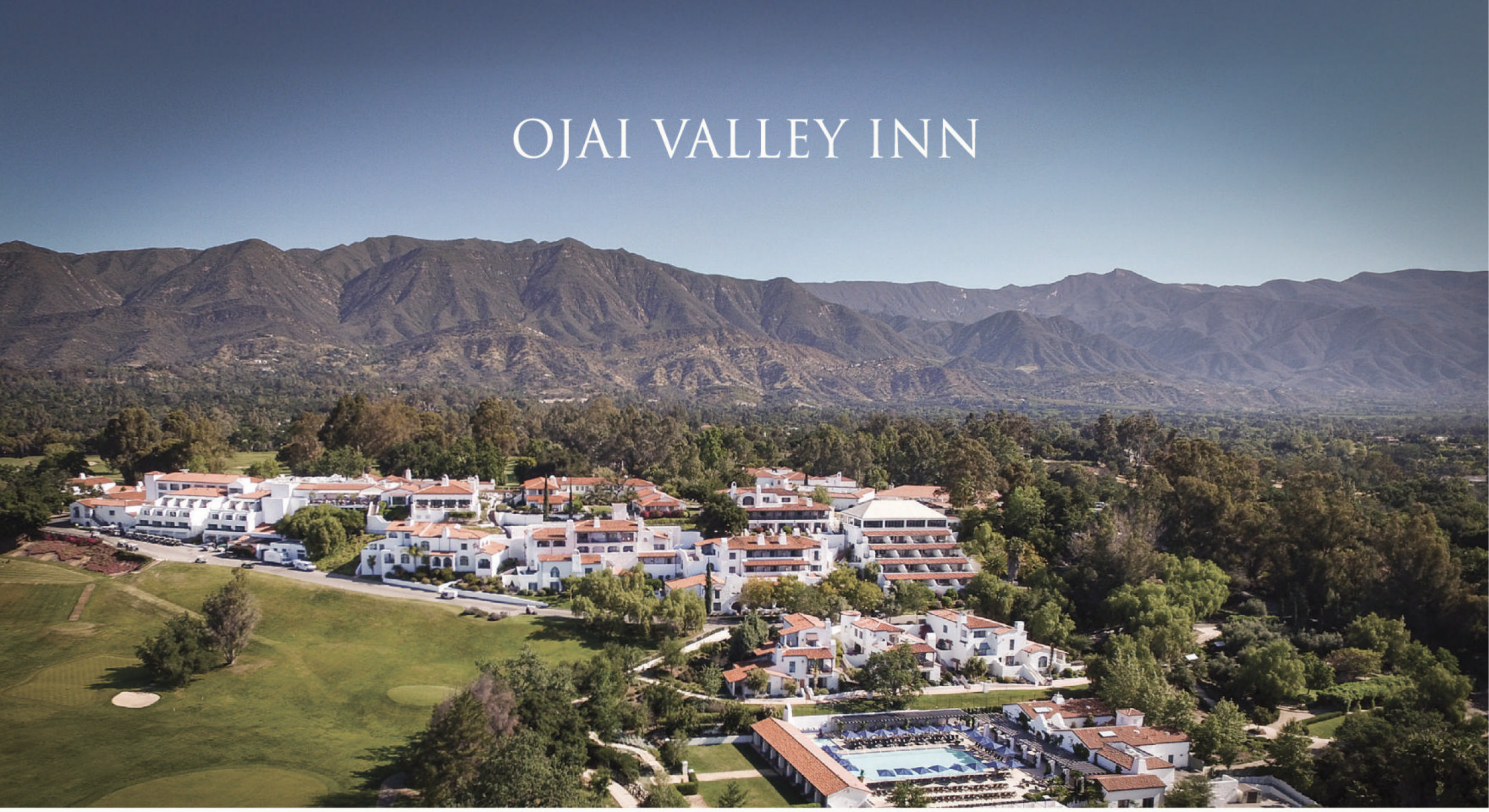

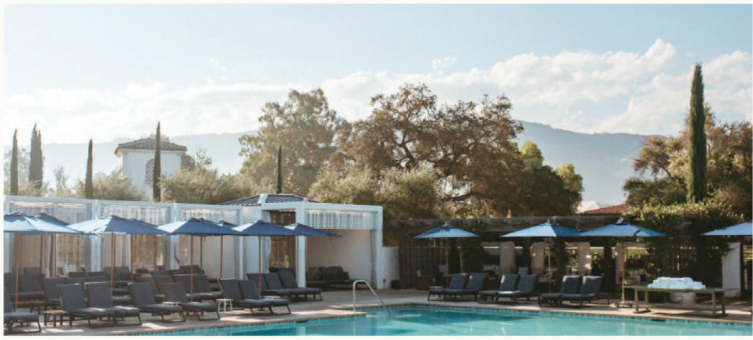

ESCAPE IN A MOMENT

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